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Understanding Change in Contemporary Students' Unions: Membership, Institutional Context, and Decision-Making

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Understanding Change in Contemporary Students' Unions: Membership, Institutional Context, and Decision-Making

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Declaration of authorship

I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

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Abstract
Students' Unions (SUs) are independent organisations that play and important role in Higher Education as the representative body for students. This study considers how changes in SU membership and the institutional context in which they are embedded have impacted on the perceptions and actions of SU officers. A total of 27 interviews were conducted with Elected Officers (EOs), Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and SU External Trustees across a representative sample of six SUs. This study draws on the relevant features of a conceptual framework for business associations as intermediary organisations (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999). An adapted version of a conceptual model for analysing change in contemporary SUs in offered.

The findings suggest that SUs had changed the way they engage with an increasingly consumer-oriented student membership in order to secure and retain their members' support. This is explained as a response to changing student preferences and the potential threat to SU independence from being resource dependent on their host Higher Education Institution (HEI). This impacted on how EOs and CEOs perceived their roles and made SUs much more student-led, which had a tendency to localise student issues and increase the need for SUs to engage with and influence their host HEI. To be effective SUs adopted similar management practices and technologies to those of their host HEI. This shift towards a more business-like way of operating was compounded by changes in charity law, which led to changes in SU governance and management structures. This strengthened the position of the CEO and highlighted SU vulnerability to external regulatory change. The research suggests that these common contextual factors resulted in the SUs in the sample adopting similar ways of organising and operating, reinforced by isomorphic tendencies. This study suggests with reference to a conceptual model that in order to be effective SUs had to maintain a difficult balance between the sometimes competing interests of their members and the expectations of their host HEI, and this shaped their organisational features and operating practices.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 The Author

Increasingly those involved in qualitative research projects in the social sciences and education are encouraged to outline their 'position' in relation to the research context as a way of revealing how their values, beliefs and experiences may have influenced their choice of research topic, the questions posed, the research methods selected, and the collection and analyse of data. With this in mind the following paragraphs set out the author's career in higher education and interest in the research topic of this thesis.

I have worked in higher education (HE) for over 30 years as a tutor, administrator, senior manager, and consultant. Following the completion of by undergraduate degree in 1981 I started my career at Liverpool University as a part-time tutor in the Department of Political Science. From 1984 I worked as a full-time administrator at Staffordshire Polytechnic (now Staffordshire University). In 1990 I accepted the post of Registrar at the then Falmouth School of Art & Design, where I worked until 2014 when I left full-time employment and engaged in consultancy work in HE.

My career spans the period of major HE policy change initiated following the election of the Conservative government in May 1979. I have direct experience of the impact of policy changes on the development, management and governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. This includes my time at Staffordshire Polytechnic when polytechnics and some HE colleges were granted independence from local authority control (in 1988) and the transition from a binary system of HE following the designation of polytechnics as universities in 1992. Falmouth School of Art & Design was granted independence from local education authority control under the 1988 Higher Education Reform Act along with the polytechnics and later became Falmouth College of Arts. I was responsible for and successfully managed the College's applications for taught degree awarding powers and university title, which was granted in 2012.

From the early 1990s the College transitioned from a small specialist art college to a university offering a much broader range of arts and media programmes of study and took advantage of opportunities to grow its student numbers from a base of c1000 students to c5000 by 2014. Throughout my time at Falmouth I was designated as the senior management contact for the Students' Union (SU), which involved maintaining working relations with officers. Over this period the union expanded its functions, infrastructure and staffing in response to a significant growth in its membership numbers (reflecting the growth of the university). I believe that SUs have an important role to play in HE in ensuring the effective representation of students' interests in HEIs.

My interest in the research topic of this thesis derives from my experience of working with SU officers whilst at Falmouth.

1.2 The Higher Education Context

Over the past three decades Higher Education (HE) in the UK has been transformed by significant expansion and reforms aimed at creating a market for HE. Expansion has increased the number of students in HE from just under 10% to c50% of those eligible opening up HE to students from lower economic social groups and increasing the diversity of the student body. The marketisation of HE, aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), introduced competition between providers for students and resources (Brown, 2013) and reconstituted HE as a consumer good (Johnson, 1994).

Students have been reconceptualised as consumers (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2018) and financially empowered by a shift from publicly funded to privately funded HE, facilitated by the introduction of tuition fees supported by government backed income contingent student loans (Williams, 2004). These changes have shifted students' orientation towards HE to one based on a consumer model with students as paying customers being persuaded to view HE as a purchase or investment in return for a good job after graduation (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). This positions students as a driving force for change in HEIs - as rational choosers who are the best judge of their own interests.

Over the period of reform HEIs have had to respond to successive attempts by government to modernise their management and to increasing competition for students and resources. Most HEIs have introduced major changes to their governance and management structures and have adopted practices and technologies more common in the corporate sector. The locus of decision-making in HEIs has shifted from collegiate governance to corporate governance structures and executive management control. This 'new managerialism' has introduced a performative culture characterised by targets, the measurement of outputs, and the management of academic staff through performance review (Deem, 2000, 2004, 2010).

HE reforms have transformed the nature and character of the relationships between some of the main actors in HE; between students and their HEI, students and their Students' Union, and Students' Unions and their host HEI (Klemenčič, 2012a).

1.3 Students' Unions

Students' Unions (SUs) or guilds have played a part in the HE sector for more than 100 years and exist in nearly every HEI in the UK. SUs are recognised in statute as the representative body for students in HEIs. There are over 600 SUs (including those in Further Education Colleges (FE)) in the UK affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS) the national representative body for students. The NUS provides training and advice to SU officers. Throughout their history SUs have demonstrated an ability to adapt and change in response to their context. SUs have historically operated a range of functions and services to students, including representation, commercial activities – shops, cafes, bars, and entertainment venues, volunteering, sports clubs, societies, and counselling and advice (Rodgers et al., 2011). Most SUs have in recent decades experienced a decline in income from their commercial activities (NUS, 2010) primarily because of competition from the high street (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015) and this has increased their dependency on their host HEI for the resources they need to operate.

SUs are independent organisations run by elected officers (EOs) with their own constitution and operate on democratic principles. There are two groups of officers in most SUs, EOs and permanent members of staff (herein referred to as appointed officers (AOs)). EOs are either recent graduates or students taking a year out of their studies and are elected by student members on the basis of manifesto promises. EOs usually serve for a one-year term of office and are responsible and accountable to their membership for the operation of their SU and for its decisions and actions. EOs are usually paid a salary and employed by or through the union. SUs employ AOs to provide administrative support and professional expertise and experience in management and administrative functions. Most SUs also employ a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or General Manager, whose primary role is to offer advice and support and who is responsible to the EOs for the management of the union and its AOs. In most SUs the EOs together with the CEO are constituted as the senior leadership team or equivalent and are responsible for decision making.

Under these arrangements it is reasonable to assume that officers involved in the decision-making process are likely to be influenced by a number of factors, including how they perceive the role and purpose of the SU and how they perceive their own role and responsibilities. These perceptions are likely to be shaped by how officers interpret their external environment including any legal, financial, or other regulatory requirements. This suggests that the decisions made by SUs and how they choose to organise are likely to be influenced by the perceptions and interpretations of officers and the interactions between officers.

1.4 The Literature

The literature on SUs is small albeit growing and includes theoretical studies (Klemenčič, 2012a, 2014) and empirical studies (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). Some empirical studies suggest that SUs have reoriented their functions in favour of representation (Brooks, Byford, and Sela, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). At the same time the nature of representation has shifted from collective national student interests led by EOs (usually in response to campaigns run by the NUS) to a focus on the local experiences of students, which is more student-led (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). This shift to a local agenda is interpreted as a response by SUs to changes in students' behaviours and the consumerisation of HE. This suggests that contemporary students are more individualistic and concerned with deriving value from their HE experience (Temple et al., 2014). This shift to a localised agenda with its focus on the student experience suggests an increase in intermediation between SUs and their host HEI. The theory of political socialisation suggests that having to engage with and influence its host HEI will influence the way SUs organise and operate. In summary, the way SUs organise and operate is likely to be influenced by its members' preferences and the need to engage with its host HEI. This in turn suggests that officers have to balance the needs of members and the influence from having to engage with their host HEI.

There is relatively little research on how these changes and other influences impact on how officers perceive their role and responsibilities, the dynamic between officers and union decision making, or how unions operate, with one exception. Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) suggest that the importance of AOs in SUs is growing at the expense of EOs. By extension this suggests that the roles and responsibilities of officers may be changing. Given the changes in SU membership and the institutional context within which unions are embedded this is perhaps not surprising. The literature is relatively quiet on the detail of these changes in roles or what this might mean for the role of SUs and how unions operate.

This study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the impact of changes in both the characteristics of membership and HEIs on the operation and effectiveness of SUs. It focuses on the perceptions of officers about their roles and responsibilities, how this impacts the dynamic between EOs and between EOs and AOs (represented by the CEO), and how this affects decision making and the way SUs operate – particularly their engagement with students and their host HEI.

The literature on SUs does not offer a conceptual framework for analysing change in SUs. This study draws on and adapts the conceptual framework for intermediary

organisations in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999) as a means of organising the data and thinking about how and why SUs may change their organisational properties. For the purposes of this study organisational properties include the role and purpose of SUs, the role and responsibilities of officers, decision-making, and how SUs engage with their membership and their host HEI. This framework is presented as a model for analysing change in SUs.

1.5 Research Questions

This study aims to further understanding of change in contemporary SUs from the perspective of the officers who work in unions. The core research question is - **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?**

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

This study covers the period in HE up to the end of July 2016, effectively the end of the 2015/16 academic year. The study adopts a critical realist conceptual philosophy that recognises that SU officers are actors engaged in social relations within structures and systems, which can constrain and facilitate their decision choices and actions (Klemenčič, 2014). It is suggested that officers interpret this context in constructing and operationalising their own role and responsibilities. The study adopts a sampling approach with officers (performing similar roles) selected from six SUs representing a sample of SUs based on the different types of HEI in which they are embedded. 24 semi-structured interviews with SU officers (EOs and CEOs) were undertaken in each SU. The data was collected through May and June 2016. This had two advantages, firstly, the EOs interviewed in the sample SUs were coming to the end of their term of office and were able to reflect on their experiences, and secondly, many of the EOs had graduated in 2014/15 and represented the first cohort of students (those on full-time three-year degree courses) who had paid the higher tuition fee introduced in 2012. It also meant that the majority of the students they were representing had also paid three years at the higher tuition fee. Following early indications of themes emerging from the data

three further semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three External Trustees (ETs) (from two of the sample SUs, two in pre 92 HEIs and one in a post 92 HEI).

Interviews with officers revealed that their roles and responsibilities were evolving, primarily in response to a reorientation of the functions of their SU to focus more on representation, and that this impacted on the dynamics between officers and decision-making. Officers confirmed that this shift was a response to more assertive consumer-oriented students who focused on matters impacting upon their experience at their HEI. This localised student preferences and issues and increasingly involved SUs spending more time intermediating between students and their host HEI. The more corporate and managerialist approach adopted by HEIs meant that SUs focused more on influencing through informal relations with senior institutional managers rather than through formal committees. Other factors, particularly the size and diversity of their membership and external regulation, also emerged as having a significant impact on the way SUs organised and operated.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This thesis is organised across six chapters including Chapter 1, this Introduction.

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the study by introducing the wider political context in which SUs they operate. The main elements of HE reform are presented together with the likely implications for SUs.

Chapter 3 presents a critical review of the relevant literature. It begins with the literature on HE reform in the UK as a way of understanding how these changes are theorised and conceptualised and their impact. It then focuses on what the literature says about the impact of these changes on the characteristics of the student body, and in particular the conceptualisation of the student as consumer. It also reviews the literature on the impact of change on the characteristics of HEIs theorised as new managerialism and professionalisation. The literature on SUs is reviewed in relation to these changes, to understand current knowledge. This chapter also introduces the main features of a conceptual framework for understanding intermediary organisations and its application to the study of change in SUs.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, research design and methods used to investigate the research questions. The rationale for the research strategy and the decision to use a purposeful sampling approach (with multiple SUs) is explained

with reference to answering the research questions. The criteria for selecting the sample SUs and the process for collecting and analysing the data are also explained.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from the research and relates them to the research questions. The findings reveal how, from the perspective of officers who work in SUs, the role of SUs is changing, and how this impacts the roles and responsibilities of officers, the dynamic between officers and decision-making, and on the way SUs operate.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and the analysis of data with reference to the literature cited in Chapter 3 and draws on the conceptual framework for intermediary organisations. The discussion points to the connections between the changes in the characteristics of membership and the characteristics of HEIs and changes in the operational properties of SUs. The analysis of the data confirms the utility of the conceptual framework.

Chapter 7 presents an adapted version of the conceptual framework as an analytical tool for studying change in SUs. The chapter concludes with a summary of the contribution the study makes to the literature and reflects on the limitations of the study. It goes on to suggest the implications for policy and practice and closes with opportunities for future research whilst commenting on the possible futures for SUs.

Chapter 2 Context

2.1 Introduction

Students' Unions (SUs), sometimes referred to as Student Associations or Guilds, are an integral part of the higher education (HE) sector in the UK and in most developed countries, and as such their evolution and trajectory is of scholarly and professional interest. It is argued that to understand how contemporary SUs are evolving and changing we need to understand the national and institutional contexts in which they are embedded (Klemenčič, 2014) and the forces for change that have shaped these contexts in recent decades. This chapter reviews HE policy reforms in the UK over several decades in order to understand how changes have impacted on students and higher education institutions (HEIs) and the likely implications for SUs. This study covers the period of change in HE in the UK from May 1979 to July 2016.

The chapter opens by considering policy developments in HE following the election of the Conservative Party in May 1979 and highlights this event as a major catalyst for the reform of HE in the UK. It can be argued that this point in history more than any other provided the foundations, built on by successive governments of all parties, for transforming HE in the UK. It is suggested that HE policy reforms, particularly changes in funding and increased regulation, represent radical attempts at changing the way students perceive their HE experience and the way HEIs operate. These policy changes have fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between government and HEIs, between students and their HEI, between students and SUs, and between SUs and their host HEI. The chapter concludes with a summary and reflections on the implications of change for SUs, and provides a link to the chapter that follows, the Literature Review.

2.2 Higher Education Reform in the UK

2.2.1 The Political Context

The election of the Conservative Government in May 1979 marked a break with the post-war consensus in British politics (Naidoo, 2008, Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The Conservatives were elected on a manifesto that promised to reduce the role of the state and was underpinned by a belief in neoliberal ideas that privileged market logics (Shepherd, 2017) as the best way to deliver public services. Markets and competition were seen as the most efficient means of allocating resources and meeting customer needs (Brown, 2013). The reform of public services that followed encapsulated this approach. The approach also advocated the adoption of management practices and technologies developed in the private for-profit sector as the best way of managing and delivering public services. This combination of a belief in market logics and private sector management practises came to be known

as new public management (NPM) (Christensen and Laegreid, 2001, Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani, 2008, Shepherd, 2017). A central element of NPM is that publicly funded organisations should be publicly accountable for their operation and effectiveness. HE and universities were included as an 'adjunct' to this reform of public service provision (Brown, 2013).

The reform of HE initiated by the Conservative Government brought into question many of the traditionally established assumptions about the nature and provision of university education. These assumptions suggested that universities were self-governing institutions funded by the state because of their contribution to the public good and should be free from political or economic influence (Marginson, 2011), that HE should be free to all those who qualify for a place, that students join a university as junior members of an academic community, and that the nature of HE provision should be determined by providers. Under new government arrangements HE was regarded as a product that should be 'subject to the same output and performance assessment as might be applied to the production of goods and services in a real market (Johnson, 1994, p.375).' Early government statements revealed this approach - 'the real key to achieving cost effective expansion lies in greater competition for funds and students (DES, 1991, p.12).' and came to lay the foundations for the marketisation of HE that followed and related policy changes introduced over 18 years of the Conservative Party in government.

From the early 1980s successive governments (including New Labour 1997-2010, and the Coalition Government 2010-2016) introduced market-led policies, drawing on market theory as a means of increasing both the efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs. Some governments emphasised particular aims, for example, New Labour's focus on social mobility and widening participation, but all continued to broadly follow a market-led approach. These changes were set in the context of a commitment to increase student places whilst at the same time reducing the unit of resource in HE funding. Early government pronouncements emphasised that universities needed to serve the economy and this came to define effectiveness primarily in terms of the need for HEIs to contribute to economic and national prosperity by providing a highly trained workforce (Naidoo, 2008). The government push for efficiency was largely grounded in the belief that universities would benefit from better management and in this respect should follow practice in the private for-profit sector. In the early years HE reform manifest as changes to the structure of the HE sector and the status of institutions, followed by changes to funding arrangements and increased regulation, and a drive for a '...much closer relationship between universities and their clients [students] (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p.201).' The latter was facilitated by the introduction of tuition fees aimed at empowering students and increasing competition between institutions for students

and resources. The sections that follow consider these and other reforms in more detail.

2.2.2 The Binary Divide

In 1979 there were 48 universities in the university sector and 30 Polytechnics and 61 Colleges in what was referred to as public sector HE. The number of institutions had grown from the early 1960s to meet the demand for HE places from those qualified to enter HE. From 1961 a number of new universities were established including Keele, Warwick, Sussex, Sterling, Lancaster, and Essex. Also, and following the recommendations of the Robbins Report (1963) approval was given for 10 colleges of advanced technology (established in 1956) to be granted university status. Universities were funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC), which operated as a buffer between universities and government. Institutions in the university sector enjoyed a high degree of independence, operated collegial governance structures and were largely self-governing communities of academics with power to award their own degrees. Academic staff enjoyed professional status and academic freedom protected by life-long tenure. In contrast public sector HE operated under local education authority (LEA) control. Polytechnics were originally conceived to offer vocational courses, on a full-time and part-time basis, as a complement to the more academic provision offered by the university sector. The first polytechnic was established in 1968 and by 1973 there were 30 institutions, established mainly from existing technical institutes, all funded through their local education authority (LEA) (Pratt, 1997). By the early 1980s many had extended their provision to include more academic courses in the arts, humanities and social sciences on a full-time basis (Pratt, 1997). Polytechnics and colleges tended to operate hierarchical management structures, academic staff were generally employed on terms and conditions determined by the LEA, which were less favourable than those enjoyed by academic staff in the university sector. Polytechnics and colleges did not have the power to award their own degrees; these were awarded under the authority of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) which was established in 1965.

The 1988 Education Reform Act (DES, 1988) transformed the structure and operation of the HE sector by incorporating polytechnics and some colleges as separate legal entities releasing them from LEA control. The Act established two new funding councils - the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) responsible for funding public sector institutions and the Universities Funding Council (UFC) as a replacement for UGC to manage university sector funding. The Act also granted polytechnics and universities increased autonomy for strategic and operational matters, effectively giving institutions autonomy to manage their own resources. There was at the same time pressure from government for institutions to

improve their efficiency through the adoption of private sector management practices.

2.2.3 A Unified Sector

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (DES, 1992) brought together public sector HE and the university sector as a unified HE sector. The Act abolished the binary line by granting polytechnics and some colleges university title, creating 38 new universities, and established the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) with responsibility (from 1 April 1993) for administering funds in support of teaching and research and for securing the assessment of quality of education at all institutions in receipt of HE funding. Under these new arrangements HEFCE was directed by an annual letter from the Secretary of State, which detailed funding for the sector and government priorities for the period ahead. HEFCE was also responsible for providing the Secretary of State with information on all aspects of teaching and research, including the funding needs of the sector. In the decades that followed HEFCE came to play a major role in overseeing the significant expansion of the sector, in terms of both student places and the number of HEIs.

2.2.4 Expansion

The expansion of student places from the early 1980s was in part a response to the increased demand for HE and attempts by successive governments to address a perceived need for a highly educated workforce able to contribute to national economic prosperity (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). In the 1979/80 academic year there were just under 780,000 students in HE (c12.4% of the eligible home population) including nearly 59,000 (7.8%) international students (from outside the EU) with the majority studying full-time undergraduate courses in 48 universities, 30 polytechnics and 61 colleges (Brown, 2013, p.5). By 2010/11, the year before the increase in tuition fees, student numbers in the HE sector had grown to c2.5 million (HESA, 2012) (numbers dropped slightly the following year purportedly in response to the increase in tuition fees but grew again in the years following) including a significant increase in international students to 14.5%, studying in 115 universities and 50 other HEIs. This expansion represented a growth from approximately 10% of the eligible population in 1972 to over 40% in 2014 (Brown, 2013). Over this period many institutions more than doubled in size. This expansion transformed the sector from an elite to a mass HE system (Trow, 1976, Scott, 1995) and impacted on the delivery of learning and teaching and the administration and management of HEIs.

The shift to a mass HE system also had a significant impact on the diversity of the student body. Under the elite system of HE students entering universities tended to

have similar backgrounds and were drawn from particular social groups (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The expansion opened up HE opportunities to students from a more diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds. The sector also experienced an increase in mature students and an expansion of different modes of study with more students studying part-time or by distance learning, and more students who worked while studying. This changing student profile brought with it a wider range of student experiences, beliefs, values, needs, demands, and interests, which added to and increased the complexity of the sector.

From 1992 the number of universities continued to grow, particularly following the removal of the requirement that those seeking university title must have research degree awarding powers (DFES, 2004). This allowed 10 HEIs to be granted university title that year and a further 11 HEIs in 2005. Outside of Oxbridge, the Russell Group of institutions enjoyed the highest research standing and prestige with post-92 universities generally regarded as having less standing. The more prestigious universities, what some refer to as 'popular institutions' (Browne, 2011) can be regarded, in recruitment terms, as selecting institutions with a surfeit of student applicants to places, in contrast to recruiting universities who generally invested more of their resources into attracting applicants. In part the explanation for this distinction relates to the origins and history of institutions (see above) and the fact that generally post-92 institutions tended to have lower status and were generally less well-resourced than pre-92 universities (Rodgers et al., 2011). This impacts on the character of institution and also on the range of support systems students need (Rodgers et al., 2011) with related resource implications. These factors impact on the institutional context within which SUs are embedded.

The link between SUs and their host institution assists in understanding the potential implications of expansion. Students automatically become members of their SU when they enrol, which means that union membership increased with enrolments. As noted earlier some institutions more than doubled in size in the period up to 2012 so SUs in those institutions would have experienced the same rise in membership numbers. The literature is relatively quiet on the impact of the size of membership on the organisation and the effectiveness of SUs. However, it would be reasonable to assume that significant increases in membership numbers put additional pressure on SU administrative and management systems. This would perhaps be compounded by the increased diversity of membership, because a more diverse membership is likely to add to the range of students' demands and interests, again testing SU organisational structures and systems. As was noted above some institutions expanded more than others and some were impacted more by the increased diversity of the student body. It seems likely that SUs embedded in these institutions would have faced different challenges, for example, SUs in institutions that recruit more students from less advantaged backgrounds, primarily post-92

universities, are likely to have faced a different set of membership needs than SUs in pre-92 universities (Rodgers et al., 2011). From this it is reasonable to posit that a SU's functions and priorities and the allocation of its resources are likely to be shaped by the needs and demands of a larger more diverse student membership. By extension perhaps the biggest change impacting on membership were the changes made to HE funding and student support.

2.2.5 The Changing Relationship between Government and HEIs and Government and Students

By the late 1980s changes in funding arrangements were a clear indication of the introduction of policies incorporating market-led approaches to the provision of HE. For the first time the government, through the UFC and PCFC, contracted with institutions for the provision of teaching rather than by direct grant. This new arrangement was predicated on the belief 'that external and internal efficiency improves if governments buy services rather than grant fund them' (Williams, 1992, p.14). The government, through the funding councils, was now the purchaser of HE services. This approach represented a shift away from process and made funding conditional upon the delivery of specified outputs. This logic assumed that institutions would respond to the demands of government as purchaser (Williams, 1992, p.135). Both funding councils were charged with managing funds to achieve growth in student numbers whilst realising efficiencies. PCFC developed a funding model that provided for growth in student numbers at marginal costs with institutions bidding for additional places and achieved a 6.5% increase in funded places whilst reducing per capita costs by 2.6% (Turner and Pratt, 1990). UFC was less successful choosing to impose an efficiency gain of 1.5% on a university sector that had little appetite for student growth at the margins (Brown, 2013). Over the following years growth in student numbers was mainly achieved through the polytechnics and colleges who demonstrated a desire to expand and reduce costs. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (DES, 1992) which granted polytechnics university title and created a single funding council, was viewed, at least in part, as an acknowledgement of their achievements and ambitions.

From 1993 the new funding council for the HE sector, HEFCE, continued to achieve efficiencies and growth in the sector through funding formulas that controlled student growth based on institutions bidding for additional student numbers at marginal cost. Between 1976 and 1994 public funding per student in real terms had dropped by 40% (NCIHE, 1997). By the mid 1990s Vice Chancellors were demanding increased funding and threatening to levy top up fees to cover teaching costs. In response in 1996 the government appointed the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) to 'make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education,

including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years' (NCIHE, 1997, p.1). The NCIHE reported in 1997 (to the Labour government elected in May) and made a number of far-reaching recommendations on the future of HE, perhaps the most important being that as beneficiaries of HE students should contribute to its costs. In response the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 (DES, 1998) introduced means tested up front top-up fees of £1000 from September 1998 and also abolished student maintenance grants. The introduction of top-up fees was an acceptance by government that the private benefit of HE needed to be acknowledged. By 2003 the White Paper the Future of Higher Education (DFES, 2003) had extended this notion by announcing the intention to introduce variable fees from 2006 of up to £3000, supported by income contingent student loans to be repaid after graduation. In 2011, following the recommendations of an independent review into HE funding (Browne, 2011) the shift from HE as a public to a private good was completed with the publication of the White Paper Higher Education Students at the Heart of the System (DBIS, 2011) which announced the intention to increase variable tuition fees from 2012 up to a maximum of £9000 to cover the full cost of teaching. Direct funding for teaching allocated through HEFCE was (with the exception of strategically important subjects) withdrawn (Brown, 2013). By 2012 funding and student support had switched 'from subsidising HEIs to subsidising students (Brown, 2013, p.93).' By 2016 most students were graduating with high levels of personal debt with loans recovered through the taxation system. This shift was engineered by policy makers who assumed that students would exercise power as consumers (Tapper, 2007) and drive change in HEIs.

The market model employed suggests that consumers need timely and reliable information if they are to make informed choices (Brown, 2008, 2013). This assumption provided the motivation for a significant increase in requirements on HEIs to produce public information as specified by government to inform prospective students' decisions. Brown (2013) suggests that information specifications announced following the recommendations of the Cooke Committee (2002) mark a significant increase in both quantitative and qualitative information requirements, based on the perceived needs of stakeholders (HEFCE, 2001). This information and other data were used to populate Unistats 'an independent website offering a range of useful info and statistics' which allowed users to 'compare official course data from universities and Colleges' (Unistats website). This information and data were also used to populate national and international league tables that compare the relative performance of HEIs and rank institutions. The use of student feedback also increased, for example, following the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005 to collect and publish final year undergraduate opinions on the quality of their degree programme. It is also suggested that information requirements were strengthened with a particular focus on the needs of students from 2009 in terms of course content and its link to career

progression (DBIS, 2009). These were added to in 2010 with judgements about the quality of public information included as part of external subject review (HEFCE, 2010) and in 2011 with requirements to produce student charters and enhance complaints procedures, and for institutions to present information in a form that was easily accessible and understandable by prospective students (DBIS, 2011).

In many ways the increased requirements on HEIs to produce public information are indicative of the significant growth in regulation in HE impacting HEIs since the late 1980s. The government rationale for increased regulation included the need to protect taxpayers' and students' interests. For the most part regulation was managed through 'independent' agencies with HEFCE playing the lead role in overseeing compliance with regulation and implementing policy. HEFCE was supported by other agencies, including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) established to provide coherence to the collection of data and the machinery for collecting and processing data submitted by institutions. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which replaced the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1997, was contracted by HEFCE to review UK HE providers in relation to academic standards and quality. Two further agencies were established in 2004 (DFES, 2004) the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) which offered a free service to students to review their complaints about their HEI, and the Office For Fair Access (OFFA). OFFA was given responsibility for signing off HEIs' access agreements, required as a condition of access to the student loan scheme, to ensure that HEIs were meeting their obligations to widening participation in HE. More recently, after the increase in fees in 2012 the Competition and Markets Authority, although not a HE sector agency, has played an increasing role. Dependence on state funding gives HEIs little choice but to meet requirements and comply with regulations.

2.3. Summary

This chapter tracks the development of HE policy reform following the election of the Conservative Party in May 1979, suggesting this as a key point in the transition from traditional notions of the purpose and operation of HE. Whilst this date is critical to understanding the nature of HE policy reform in the UK it is also important to acknowledge that the university sector and public sector HE had expanded from the early 1960s and that this included the establishment of new universities with different histories and traditions and polytechnics conceived as a complement to university provision. The development of the polytechnics and in particular their transition to university status is important to any analysis of institutional context. The experience of polytechnics under LEA control suggests that their management structures were better able to respond to the funding changes and increased regulation that characterised HE policy. The broad distinction

between pre and post 92 universities has some utility in this respect as it provides a useful way of understanding the very different cultures and traditions of institutions that fall into these categories. It also poses questions about the impact of these traditions and cultures on institutional contexts, and by extension the implications for the SUs that are embedded in these contexts.

The chapter also considers briefly policy explanations for changes in funding arrangements and increased regulation and the impact on students and HEIs. The introduction of tuition fees in 1998 represents a milestone in the transition from HE as a public good to HE as a private good. The principle that students should contribute towards the cost of their HE experience opened up the way for future increases in tuition fees and the eventual transfer of funding from the state to students and HEIs. The change also strengthened the notion of the student as a consumer of HE and HEIs as providers of HE services. This notion was consistent with attempts by policy makers to create a market for HE and to make HEIs, through competition and increased regulation, more responsive to student preferences.

In conclusion, the context within which SUs operate and are embedded has been the subject of significant reform impacting on students as members of SUs and on the HEIs that host SUs. How these changes impact on SUs is of scholarly and professional interest. The core research question for this study is - **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?** Any analysis of change in contemporary SUs must understand the characteristics of union membership and the institutional context in which they are embedded. This study draws on the literature on HE reform, with a particular focus on marketisation and the literature on SUs. The following chapter critically reviews this literature to explore current understandings and to identify gaps in extant research.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Students' Unions (SUs) play a central role in higher education (HE) as the representative body for students. Over the past three decades HE student numbers in the UK have expanded significantly transforming HE from an elite to a mass HE system (Trow, 1976, Scott, 1995). This transformation has been informed by a commitment by successive governments to a neoliberal ideology that privileges market logics. Market-led approaches to the provision of HE reconceptualise the student as a consumer and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as providers of HE services, made more efficient and effective by competition. In response HEIs have become more corporate, managerialist and professionalised. These changes have radically reoriented the relationships between the constellations of actors in HE, in particular the relationship between students and their HEI. Students' Unions (SUs) are embedded within these changing national and institutional contexts.

How these changes impact on the operation and choices made by contemporary SUs is of scholarly and professional interest and provides the impetus for this study. As the representative body for students SUs intermediate between students and their HEI to promote and protect the interests of their members. This review critically analyses the literature to understand the impact of HE policy reform in England on students and HEIs, and the implications for SUs. It draws on a body of HE literature covering marketisation, managerialism, professionalisation, and SUs and wider literature on intermediary organisations and related theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This study covers the period in HE in the UK up to 31 July 2016, effectively the end of the 2015/16 academic year.

3.2 Purpose and Approach

3.2.1 Research Question

The broad review topic and question is: **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?**

The following review questions, derived from this broad line of enquiry, guided the literature review:

- What are the main elements of HE policy reform in the UK?
- How are these elements changing the national and institutional HE contexts?

- How do these changes impact on organisational structures and the behaviours and relationships between key actors?
- What are the implications for contemporary SUs?

In answering the above, what gaps are there in the extant research on SUs?

3.2.2 Data Search and Collection Process

The data search and collection processes were iterative. A number of electronic databases were searched primarily Business Source Premier, Emerald, Web of Science [abstracts only], and ERIC. Google Scholar was used later in the search. Two main searches were undertaken: the first focused on HE policy reform and the second on SUs. Key words were used – for example, 'Higher Education Reform' as a topic, and 'marketisation', 'consumerisation', 'regulation', 'Students' Unions', 'student associations', 'student governments', 'student guilds', as subjects. Database features such as inverted commas to denote a phrase, truncation and wildcard, relevance, limiting publications by year, de-selecting, for example, Science and the Arts, and focusing on education and management as subject categories were utilised to limit and refine searches. Finding an article and then using search features to find other publications citing this article and related articles were used.

In order to build a body of literature relevant to the topic texts identified from the electronic searches were filtered for relevance in two stages, first by title and then following a review of abstracts. At this stage texts cited multiple times in references across the literature in the field were also identified, and the same process applied until it was felt that the process had been exhausted. Texts were then read in full as a final check and a list of relevant texts compiled.

3.2.3 Data Evaluation and Coding

The focus of the review was on searching research outcomes data, methods, and theories. The data was coded using a spreadsheet to specify the data to be extracted from the texts and included research outcomes, research methods, and the type of data represented, for example, empirical, and reduced using narrative summaries. Themes and contrary views and interpretations were then identified.

3.3 A New Paradigm for Higher Education

The significant expansion of HE in most developed nations from the 1970s onwards transformed publicly funded HE from elite to mass systems (Trow, 1976, Scott, P. 1995). This growth was in part a response to government concerns about a need to compete in the emerging global knowledge economy and the belief that success would depend on a high skilled workforce (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The expansion posed a number of challenges for governments particularly how to meet the increased cost of HE in the context of pressure to reduce public expenditure. The ascendance of neoliberal ideas as an international phenomenon shaped governments' response (Brown, 2013). This ideology argues that markets are the most efficient 'system of social co-ordination whereby the supply and demand for goods or services is balanced through a price mechanism (Brown, 2009)' and should be applied to the delivery of public services. This marketisation draws on economic theory and suggests that the interaction of providers and consumers determines what is to be produced and at what price and quality (Ball, 2012). Neoliberal ideas combined with private sector management practices evolved into a new approach to the management of public services, including publicly funded universities, known as New Public Management (NPM) (Shepherd, 2017). A major tenant of NPM is that publicly funded organisations should be publicly accountable to the taxpayer and to service users (Bovens, 2007). The trend towards market-led approaches to the provision of HE represents what some argue is an international convergence of ideas on the provision of publicly funded HE (Vidovich and Slee, 2001). This argument also acknowledges that the policy choices made by national governments diverge to reflect different national contexts. The following section considers literature on HE policy developments in the UK up to 2012.

3.4 Creating a Market for Higher Education in the UK

3.4.1 Marketisation

The UK is credited with being one of the most enthusiastic implementers of market-led approaches to the provision of HE (Naidoo and Williams, 2015, p.209). In recent decades successive governments have introduced policy reforms aimed at making HEIs more responsive to student preferences and serving national economic interests (Brown, 2013). HE in the UK in the 1980s consisted of universities that were largely protected from market forces and enjoyed relative autonomy (Naidoo and Williams, 2015) and polytechnics and colleges operating under local education authority control and designated as 'public sector higher education' (Pratt, 1997). In 1988 polytechnics were given independence from local education authority control and in1992 were granted university title as part of a unified national HE system. Under new arrangements universities were given greater autonomy and responsibility for the management of their own affairs. However, some suggest that autonomy in this context was very different from the autonomy enjoyed by

universities in the university sector and is better conceptualised as 'management autonomy' (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2013).

Brown (2013) argues that the policy changes (DBIS 2011) introduced by the coalition government in 2012 in many ways represent the final stage of attempts to marketise HE by transforming a publicly funded free at the point of delivery system into a privately funded system based on consumer preferences (Williams, 1997). The policy changes aimed to put 'students at the heart of the system' (DBIS, 2011) as a way of ensuring that HEIs would respond to the needs of students and employers (Brown, 2013). It is argued that these changes provided continuity with attempts by successive governments since the early 1980s to create a market for HE in the UK based on the belief that HEIs would be more efficient and effective if they had to compete for students and resources. Students are used as the client base to drive change in HEIs (Deem, 2004). The 'key issue' posed by policy makers was the challenge facing HEIs in 'putting the undergraduate experience at the heart of the system' (DBIS, 2011, p.4) addressed by placing '…. the student in the driving seat' and making HEIs 'accountable to students and the taxpayer' (p.4). This notion of accountability provided the rationale for opening up HEIs as publicly funded institutions (or in the case of tuition fees, underwritten by the public purse) to public scrutiny. The following sections consider two primary policy levers used by successive governments to implement change in HE - funding and regulation.

3.4.2 Funding

In England funding for HE is controlled by the UK government (different arrangements exist Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and has been used as a primary lever to bring about sector-wide change (Vidovich and Slee, 2001). Most HEIs are dependent on government for all or most of the funding they need for teaching and research. Changes in funding arrangements since the 1980s have shifted the emphasis away from a system of centrally administered government grants to student tuition fees, effectively transferring the responsibility for funding teaching (except for 'strategically important and vulnerable' subjects) from the state to students and HEIs (Brown, 2013). Some regard the 2012 changes as '…the largest-scale single change in the financing of higher education ever seen in an advanced country (Temple et al., 2014, p.3). The changes increased the 'student contribution' from £3375 (2011/12 rate) up to a maximum of £9000 per academic year for first time undergraduate students from autumn 2012. The changes were predicated on the belief that 'putting more financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice more meaningful.' (DBIS, 2011, p.5). And that '…. student choice drives competition, including price (DBIS, 2011, p.19)'. The rationale for this change was twofold, firstly, to meet the demands from HEIs for investment whilst at the same time addressing the need to reduce public spending,

and secondly (following the recommendations of the Browne Review 2010) that as primary beneficiaries students should contribute more to the cost of their higher education (White Paper, 2011, p.4, Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004, cf. Carpentier, 2010,). In support of the latter the White Paper (DBIS 2011) cited evidence that graduates benefit from average earnings higher than those who do not experience HE.

The aims of the 2011 reforms resonated with earlier government objectives - 'The resources made available are intended to secure delivery of educational services which are of satisfactory or better quality and which are responsive to the needs of students and employers' (DES, 1987, 4.16, p.31). The 2011 reforms continued with a funding system based on incentives for providers reflected by the relaxation of student number controls to allow 'good' institutions to grow, thereby increasing competition and allowing better HEIs to recruit more students. Consistent with this approach the reforms opened the sector up to new providers with the aim of improving student choice through competition. The reforms also provided incentives to Further Education institutions to provide HE at lower fees. In later developments the government relaxed the limit on student numbers for 2013/14 and removed them from 2014/15. The changes to funding arrangements had no direct impact on SUs.

The 2011 reforms transformed funding arrangements for HE whilst allowing the government to retain control. Tuition fees, funded through income contingent student loans (underwritten by the state) continued to be regarded as 'public funding support' and legitimised the authority of government, through sector agencies, to regulate the HE sector in order to protect students' and taxpayers' interests (DBIS, 2011, p.66). The following section considers increased regulation and its implications.

3.4.3 Regulation

The HE sector has always been subject to regulation but under HE reform the nature of regulation changed (Lodge, 2015). This increase in regulation marked what some regard as a growth in state control of the HE sector (Henkel and Little, 1999, Scott, 2001, Deer, 2002) and a shift to a more evaluative and supervisory role (van Vaught, 1989) with the state steering HE at a distance (Huisman, 2004, p.534, Enders et al., 2011) through regulation and monitoring (Neave, 1988, 1998). The increase in regulation and accountability measures move institutions from being 'self-governed' to 'state governed' (Shattock, 2008). In this respect the market for HE operates more as a quasi-market (LeGrand and Bartlett, 1993) - a combination of market mechanisms and strong state regulation (Naidoo, 2008). It is suggested

that whilst HEIs retained their legal independence and were free to make their own decisions they were 'heavily constrained by policies initiated in the heart of Whitehall (Shattock, 2008, p.182).' Prior to the reforms of the 1980s pre 92 universities were largely regarded as being self-regulating institutions, what King (2006) refers to as 'state backed professional autonomy and self-regulation' (p.9) with collegial governance and academic autonomy and professional self-regulation by academics being the typical model (King, 2006, p.9). This contrasted with post 92 universities that operated under local education authority control and national accreditation arrangements for academic standards. King (2006) suggests that the fact that Polytechnics existed under local education authority control made it easier for the government to impose stronger regulations on the sector as a whole from 1992. King (2006) argues that polytechnics and colleges, because of their experience under LEA control, were better placed, and perhaps more receptive to the changes to their governance and management structures than universities and that this may have been a consideration by government in making the changes to the structure of the HE sector that followed. The need for regulation is predicated on the belief that a democratically elected government should protect the interests of students and the taxpayer. Regulations also provided the necessary 'safeguards' to counter the perceived risks associated with the additional autonomy granted to universities from 1992.

For some the notion of regulation is incompatible with market logics and the state stepping back. Williams (2004) suggests 'The importance for public policy purposes is not the existence of a market but the extent and the way the markets are regulated. What are providers and purchases allowed and encouraged to do, how are they regulated and are the regulations enforced?' (p.265). From the early 1990s these questions were answered through stronger central control overseen by government and 'independent agencies' (Stensaker and Harvey, 2011). These agencies have come to play an increasingly prominent role in designing regulations and overseeing compliance with regulatory requirements. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has played a major role in working closely with HEIs to ensure compliance. From its inception in 1992 HEFCE was central to implementing changes desired by government. HEFCE contracted with HEIs to deliver 'educational services' and established the principle that receipt of funding was conditional upon the delivery of specified outputs and compliance with regulatory requirements. HEFCE had statutory powers to attach conditions to the receipt of teaching grants and access to student loan funding and to intervene, for example, if it found 'evidence…. of widespread poor treatment of students (DBIS, 2011, p.68).' The 2011 reforms strengthened HEFCE's role and the roles of other sector agencies.

Over the reform period additional agencies were created to oversee particular areas of policy, these included the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) and the Office For Fair Access (OFFA). The 2011 reforms strengthened the powers of these agencies to include in HEFCE's case its transition from funding council to lead regulator and 'consumer champion and promoter of a competitive system' (DBIS 2011, p.6). These agencies add to the number of actors in the HE context impacting on HEIs, students, and SUs.

The White Paper (DBIS, 2011) was not neutral on the purpose of SUs and asserted the important role of SUs in intermediating between students and their HEI. Further it explained that the proposal to add a question to the NSS seeking student views on the performance of their SU would help SUs improve their performance. The White Paper acknowledged the important role SUs play in '…the civil society within higher education institutions (p.36)' and states that 'Effective students' unions are prime examples of organisations run for and by their members' (p.36) and that they 'can help greatly in improving the dialogue and facilitating stronger partnerships between higher education institutions and their students' (p.36).

In summary, the 2011 reforms radically changed the way HE was funded and regulated. By transferring financial power to students policy makers believed that HEIs would be more responsive to student preferences. New sector-wide regulations included strengthening the powers of sector-wide agencies and increasing the information requirements on HEIs, all of which purported to safeguard student and taxpayers' interests and to ensure that students received value for money. Marketisation, new funding arrangements and increased regulation impact on the wider context in which SUs operate. Before going on to consider the impact of these changes on the student body and HEIs, and the implications for SUs, the following section considers the generic features of SUs and factors likely to constrain or facilitate their decision-making choices.

3.5 Students' Unions

3.5.1 Students' Unions

SUs have established themselves as an important part of the HE sector and as organisations operate in nearly all HEIs. In 2015 there were over 600 SUs in the UK, differentiated by size, traditions, cultures and histories (often reflecting those of their host institution) and the resources they have available. SUs are independent organisations with their own constitution whose primary purpose is to represent and promote the interests of their members (Rodgers et al., 2011) by acting as the intermediary body between students and authorities (Klemenčič, 2014). SUs are dependent on their host HEI for most or all the resources they need to operate.

Most SUs operate commercial services, for example, shops and bars, which provides additional income. In recent times this source of income has declined, which some suggest has impacted negatively on SU independence (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). In general SUs in pre-92 universities tend to be better resourced than their post-92 universities counterparts (Rodgers et al., 2011). SUs originally formed to provide services to students, for example, entertainment and travel, and have developed over time to offer a wide range of functions and student services. It is suggested that in recent times SU functions have shifted towards a greater emphasis on representation and membership services in response to changing student preferences (Brooks, Byford and Seal, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015).

Students automatically become members of their SU (and the National Union of Students (NUS)) when they enrol unless they choose to opt out of membership - an option that is rarely exercised. Nearly all SUs are affiliated to, and stakeholders in, the NUS. The NUS offers benefits, including student travel discounts and bulk purchasing discounts that benefit individual SUs. The NUS also offers professional advice, support and training to union officers, and policy advice and guidance. The NUS represents students in national policy debates and has during the period of HE reform positioned itself in opposition to many of the changes, particularly the consumerisation of HE (NUS, 2009, 2010). In respect to the latter, it has attempted to mitigate the impact of government policy by calling for a 'partnership' approach between institutions and SUs and has advised its member SUs accordingly (NUS, 2012). The NUS has historical connections with trades unions and has played a central role in the student movement.

Like many national student associations the NUS was active in mobilising student support, mainly through SUs, for political campaigns and student demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s. This period was an active time for student politics nationally and internationally with students involved in protests that extended beyond education policy, for example, apartheid in South Africa. There is an extensive literature on these high-profile student demonstrations and protests (Altbach, 1979, 1989, 1991, 2006). Perhaps in keeping with this trend in October 1969 the NUS changed a clause (clause three) in its constitution, which confined it to 'no politics' and broadened its aims and objectives to reflect its support for an increasingly politicised student movement. The national and international activities of the student movement often led to violent confrontation between students and the state, for example, student protests in Paris in May 1968, and attracted both academic and media interest. There are myriad explanations for the rise in student unrest, but one thing seems clear this period perhaps more than any other served to establish student identities and public perceptions of the NUS and SUs, reinforced by the media. Whilst student protests continued to form the basis of NUS activities from

the early 1970s student collective action declined. The student protests and campus sit-ins against the proposed increase in tuition fees in late 2010 provide a more recent example of student collective action. The protests were co-ordinated by NUS but unlike the protests of the 1960s failed to have the desired impact of changing government policy (Hensby, 2013).

The student protests of the 1960s are credited with moves in most developed nations to include students as part of university governance arrangements. Prior to the 1970s students were not formally recognised as a constituency in university decision-making. In the UK it was the NUS that campaigned in the early 1970s and successfully negotiated nationally with Vice Chancellors to include student representation on university committees and to recognise SUs as the body representing student interests. This shift raised the profile of student representation as part of the functions of SUs, and drew union elected officers into governance arrangement through serving on institutional committees. It can be posited that this provided a further dimension to SU representation adding to what was probably more of a focus on national policy issues through the NUS. The rationale for including students as part of institutional governance arrangements might in this case be regarded as a 'political realist' approach (Luescher-Manashela, 2013) as a means of reducing the potential for more adversarial relations. This said, NUS and SUs involvement in organising national campaigns and protests remained an issue for some in political circles, primarily those on the political right, who questioned the legitimacy of the NUS and SUs using what they regarded as public money to fund overtly political activities.

The Conservative Party elected in May 1979 promised in its manifesto to reform the trades unions, particularly restricted practices around the operation of 'the closed shop' (Conservative Party, 1979, 2.2). These political priorities came to incorporate the NUS and SUs. John Patten (Secretary of State for Education) at the Conservative Party Conference in October 1993 announced:

"Last year I promised this Conference that I would end one of the remaining closed shops in this country – that of students' unions. We said we would do it and we will do it in three ways. By the introduction of the voluntary principle as the basis for students' union membership, through a tough code of practice to prevent victimisation and by putting an end to taxpayers' money being used to fund political campaigns."

This commitment was reflected in proposals in the 1994 Education Bill (DES, 1994), which included a provision for students to opt in to SU membership and

other reforms aimed as constraining union activities and the use of union funds. Changing arrangements to opt in would have had a major detrimental impact on SU funding and the NUS. In response the NUS and SUs mounted a successful national campaign that resulted in changes to the Bill, which included retaining SU membership as opt out. However, the 1994 Education Act (DES, 1994) did reinforce the role and purpose of SUs as the representative body for students in HEIs and specified that unions should operate democratically in the interests of their members and be accountable for their funds (Rodgers et al., 2011). The passage of the 1994 legislation perhaps reveals how vulnerable SUs are to political change.

3.5.2 Status, Role and Purpose

SUs are embedded in HEIs and are formally recognised as the representative body for students by the Education Act 1994. The Act defines the meaning of a SU as 'an association of the generality of students at an establishment whose principal purposes include promoting the general interests of its members as students; or a representative body (whether an association or not) whose principal purposes include representing the generality of students at an establishment….in academic, disciplinary or other matters relating to the government of the establishment' (Part II, 20 (1) (a) and (b)). Some suggest that what constitutes 'the general interests of its members' is broad and open to interpretation (Rodgers, et al., 2011). Under the Act the governing body of a HEI is responsible for ensuring that the SU 'operates in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances' (Part II, 22 (1)) and for taking 'such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that the requirements [set out in the Act] are observed' by its SU. The Act includes a requirement that SUs have a written constitution, that appointments to 'major offices' of a union should be by secret ballot, and that students should have the right not to be a member of the union. Subsequent attempts have been made by government to emphasise the representative function, for example, the suggestion that SUs have an important role to play in articulating 'the interests of students to the institution, [and] advocate on their behalf….' (DBIS, 2011, p.36). Further that it is envisaged that the role of SUs will become more important in supporting student representatives at all levels in their role (DBIS 2011, p.36). Whilst formal recognition by the state legitimises and in many ways strengthens SU independence (Klemenčič, 2014) it also potentially leaves unions exposed to political change.

Another important feature of SUs is that they are charities. Nearly all SUs registered as charities from 2010 (under the Charities Act 2006) and operate as charitable (not for profit) organisations regulated by the Charity Commission. Under previous arrangements SUs had the benefits of charitable status as part of their HEI that were arguably less onerous. Having to register in their own right

requires the adoption of charitable objects and constitutional changes including the establishment of a Trustee Board, which in nearly all unions includes provision for the appointment of independent External Trustees (ETs) in additional to student trustees. Charitable status confers benefits on registered charities, primarily exemption from the payment of certain taxes. In order to retain charitable status registered charities must operate in accordance with their charitable objects, which are written into their constitutions. As charities SUs are constrained by charity law in their activities and the use of their funds. The impact of charity registration on the organisation and effectiveness of SUs is under-researched. The Charities Act 2006 and the Education 1994 set the primary regulatory conditions for the status, role and purpose of SUs, how they operate and use their funds. It is reasonable to assume that these legal constraints are likely to constrain the scope of SU activities and how they use their resources.

3.5.3 Resources

SUs receive most or all of the funding and other resources, for example, accommodation (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2016) they require to operate from their host HEI. There is no national formula for funding SUs and as such the resources individual unions have at their disposal can vary considerably, with those in pre 92 universities generally better resourced than post 92 universities (Rodgers et al., 2011). The majority of SUs receive their funding in the form of a block grant, usually negotiated annually with their HEI and determined with reference to a combination of factors, primarily student numbers. All students automatically become members of their SU when they register. The right of students to opt out of union membership has in the past been the subject of contestation with some in political circles arguing that the monopoly SUs hold on representation and other services works against principles of competition and student choice and that students should be given the choice to opt in rather than opt out of SU membership. International examples of experiments with 'opt in' or voluntary student unionism (VSU) (cf. Rochford, 2014 for the experience in Australia) serve as a reminder that SU funding linked to membership numbers in market-led systems is likely to remain a source of contestation. Another feature is that SUs are funded from general HEI funds and as such may be perceived by departments in the institution as just another department competing for scarce resources and should be subject to the same financial scrutiny and accountability.

Some SUs also generate a surplus from commercial activities, which provides a separate source of income, which some argue strengthens union independence (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b). Over the past two decades most SUs have experienced a significant decline in commercial activities which some attribute to changing student preferences and competition from the high street (Lu Guan, Cole

and Worthington, 2015). This has a number of potential implications including a loss of income resulting in increased dependency on their host HEI, and diminishing student loyalty reflected in a shift to high street providers (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015),

Some suggest that the more dependent SUs are on their host HEI the more likely they are to be subject to steering or intervention by senior institutional managers (Klemenčič, 2014). Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) suggest that there is an asymmetry of power between HEIs and SUs, in favour of HEIs. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that the more dependent SUs are on their host the less freedom they are likely to have to pursue their own agenda and the more exposed they are to the potential for intervention by their host HEI. Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) suggests that control of resources is linked to power and that resource dependency can leave independent organisations open to influence from those who control access to resources. This suggests that SUs are at risk of being influenced by their HEI. Brooks, Byford and Seal (2015b) suggest that unions that are totally dependent on their HEI for funding have no choice but to follow their host's agenda. Resource dependency has the potential to delimit and constrain SU decision-making choices and to draw SUs closer to the agenda of their HEI.

In contrast to this view some suggest that resource dependency is mitigated by the fact that SUs are important stakeholders and have political resources at their disposal. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that SUs are in an exchange relationship with their HEI, and can offer information, legitimisation of policy, control of members, and the provision of services valued by their HEI. In return the HEI provides the resources SUs need (Klemenčič, 2014, p.400). In addition, it is argued that in market-led systems the financial empowerment of students is likely to strengthen the position of SUs as stakeholders. It can be posited that to be credible in exercising influence SUs will need to be able to draw on student support as a resource. In summary, legal requirements and resource dependency have the potential to both constrain and facilitate SU decision-making choices. It can be posited that the financial empowerment of students as consumers is likely to have strengthened the position SUs as a stakeholder group.

3.5.4 Functions

SUs have historically offered a range of functions including 'representation of students, advice services, student volunteering, sports clubs, societies, training provision, communication and media services, union shops, bar and venue services and entertainment services.' (Rodgers et al., 2006). The emphasis placed on

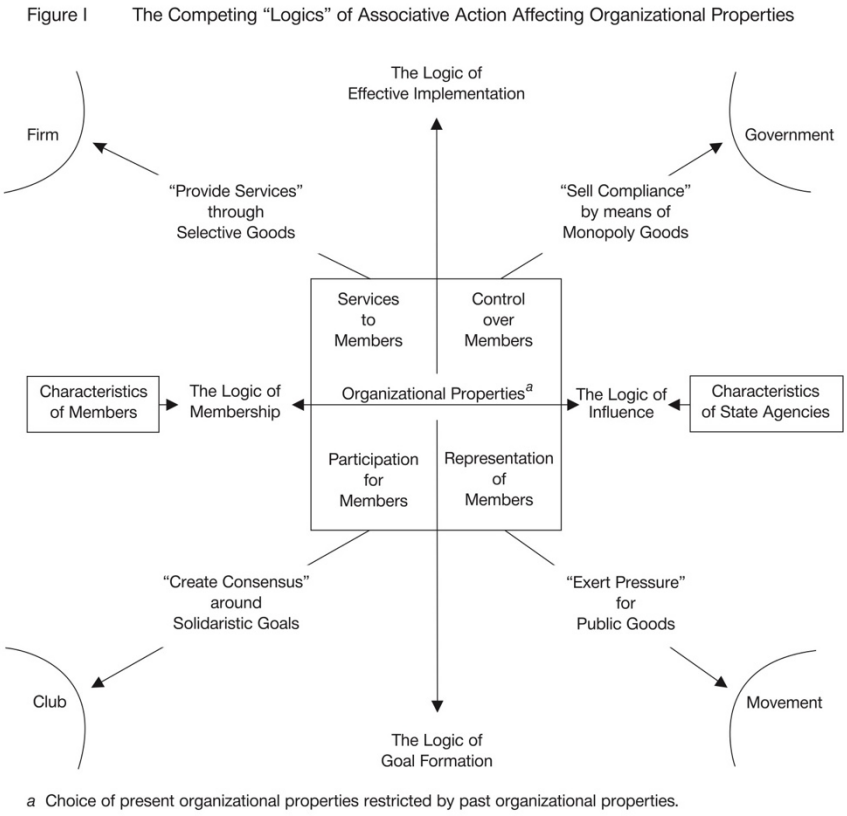
functions has changed over time shaped by a number of factors including a union's history, traditions, the resources they have at their disposal and the preferences of their members. For example, Rogers et al. (2011) suggest that unions in post 92 universities tend to invest more in student welfare support because of the socio-economic profile of their membership. Klemenčič (2012a) suggests that the primary function of a SU is to protect and promote the collective interests of its members. It is suggested that in recent times the universal trend has been for SUs to prioritise educational representation as their main function (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015).

In order to represent effectively members' interests SUs have to intermediate with those authorities that have the power to affect or influence student interests. The representation function involves SUs in a process of intermediation, primarily with their host HEI and other authorities with the power to affect student interests. It is suggested that as intermediary organisations the way SUs organise and operate will be influenced by competing imperatives or logics, what Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999) refer to as the 'logic of membership' and the 'logic of influence'. The logic of membership suggests that SUs will organise themselves in ways that enable them to satisfy the particular preferences of their members. The logic of influence suggests that in order to effectively intermediate student interests SUs will organise and operate in ways that allow them to connect effectively with their host HEI. Further the theory of political socialisation suggests that SUs are likely to mimic or mirror their host HEI in order to effectively influence their host HEI (Klemenčič, 2014). Thus, both the logic of membership and the logic of influence are likely to influence the organisational features of SUs, which for the purpose of this review include officers' roles and responsibilities, administrative structures and processes, and decision-making.

Schimitter and Streeck (1981/99) also suggest that intermediary organisations are subject to two further imperatives, the 'logic of efficient implementation' and the 'logic of goal formation' (p.19). The logic of efficient implementation suggests that organisations will be influenced by the need to operate efficiently, manifest in the adoption of business processes, routines, and decision-making. The risks associated with this imperative are that organisations will be driven from above rather than through the involvement of its members. This is linked to managerial imperatives driven by the need for efficiency and best management practices. The logic of goal formation suggests that organisations will need to put arrangements in place to allow for 'widespread membership involvement' (p.20) if they are to retain the support of their members. This is likely to involve processes that identify and aggregate members' views and preferences. It is suggested that organisations with more homogenous memberships are likely to have less diverse views and will be easier to manage than those with more diverse members' interests who are likely to

expend more resources on engaging with members. The logics of efficient implementation and goal formation often compete with efficiency being at odds with the need to ensure appropriate members' involvement and legitimising policy from below. This also reveals a 'tension between administrative management, permanent staff and professional experts on the one hand, and …. elected leaders…. on the other (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999, p.22).' These logics sit orthogonally to the logics of membership and influence (see ***Figure 1***).

Figure 1



From Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999, p. 21)

The model further explains that consideration of the influence of the 'logic of membership' and the 'logic of influence' is informed both by the characteristics of membership and the authority to be influenced. Also, that these competing logics operate within and will be influenced by the contexts within which members and organisations are embedded. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that any investigation of SUs must take into account the context in which they are embedded, what she refers to as 'context-dependent investigation'. The context includes 'norms, values, institutional rules, relationships – formal and informal, beliefs, and cultural factors,

historical trajectories, and critical events' (p.401). The context will influence how the various actors exercise agency, how they interact, their behaviours and the choices they make. In this respect the context can constrain or facilitate the choices made by the actors involved. It is important to acknowledge that SUs are not passive actors and that they will exercise agency in their interactions with other actors in specific contexts. The way SU officers interpret the context in which they are embedded and interact with other actors is likely to be influenced by how they perceive their role and responsibilities.

3.5.5 The Roles of Officers and Decision-Making

SUs are governed by principles of representative democracy; this locates responsibility for overseeing the management and direction of the SU with elected officers (EOs). EOs are elected by and accountable to the membership of the SU. EOs are typically recent graduates or students taking a year out from their studies to serve as sabbatical officers of their SU. It would be reasonable to assume that EOs, particular those taking a break in their studies, are likely to continue to identify as students whilst in office. EOs normally serve a one-year term of office although some SUs allow officers to stand for a second term (two years being the maximum allowed under the Education Act 1994). The term of office usually covers an undergraduate academic year running from August to July. EOs are paid a monthly salary by or through their union for the duration of their term of office. Given their age and route into HE it is likely that most EOs will have had limited or no experience of full-time employment. It is also likely that EOs will receive 'in-house' training although the literature suggests that the training provided by SUs can vary (Rodgers et al., 2011). Most SUs usually have four or more EO positions, with the number usually determined by the size of the SU and its functions. EO positions tend to have a particular responsibility, for example, sport or education, and this is reflected in the EO title, for example, Vice President Education. Most SUs also have an EO position designated as the President of the SU. The National Union of Students (NUS) offers training for new EOs at the start and throughout their term of office.

The NUS offers advice on the different activities that all EOs should be involved in and divides these into four roles. The first is the representative role, which requires EOs to be the "voice" of students, listening to student views and opinions and exercising judgement on how best to represent these. The second is the activist role, which involves a responsibility for campaigning for change and building student activism. The third is the trustee role, which involves responsibility for the oversight of the union as an organisation and for safeguarding its future. Finally, the minister role, which reflects a portfolio responsibility for a specific activity, for

example, sports or volunteering, or policy area, for example, equality (NUS, 2009, p.5).

Nearly all SUs employ full time permanent members of staff or Appointed Officers (AO). AOs typically have knowledge, expertise and experience in management and administration. Most SUs also appoint a General Manager (GM) or by the more recent title of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who has responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the union, overseeing its financial health and compliance with legal and financial requirements, and for line managing AOs It is reasonable to assume, given the nature of the responsibilities, that the CEO is likely to have general and/or specific management skills and experience. Formally the CEO is accountable to the EOs. There is relatively little in the literature about the role and responsibilities of the CEO or the relationship between the CEO and EOs. In its advice to EOs in their role as trustees the NUS offers insights into the relationship between EOs and the CEO, for example, that EOs should set targets for the CEO as part of a 'performance management system' so that EOs can monitor the development of the union (NUS, 2009, p.12). The NUS advice to EOs is that AOs are employed to support them in their role, whilst acknowledging that AOs 'bring specialism and expertise to the operational areas of the union' (2009, p.12).

The NUS advice to EOs on what support they can expect in carrying out their responsibilities provides insights into the role and responsibilities of AOs including the CEO (NUS, 2009). EOs as trustees are responsible for overseeing the management and operation of the SU and its strategic development through the CEO. The CEO is responsible to the Trustee Board for delivering on targets relating to the development and strategic direction of the union. It is EOs who have the authority of the membership and are the key decision-makers in the SU (NUS 2009, p.12). It is reasonable to assume therefore that EOs constitute the key decision-making group and that the CEO, and other AOs, support this process. Some suggest that in recent times SUs have had to increase their capacity in response to a reorientation of functions and activities, and a professionalisation of the services they offer (Klemenčič, 2012a). The literature is relatively quiet on what 'professionalisation' in this context means or what increased capacity involves.

The literature suggests that the role AOs and the relationship between EOs and AOs may be changing. For, example, Brooks et al. (2015a) suggest '…. a shift in power and influence away from elected officers and towards permanent members of union staff…' (p.176) and offers increased contact between senior institutional managers and permanent staff in support of this finding. The findings do not reveal how the roles of officers are changing, and what the implications are for the dynamic between EOs and permanent staff, and SU decision-making. Further, it is suggested

that ‘given the rapid turnover of elected officials and the transient nature of studentship, student governments tend to be more susceptible to change under the influence of individual ‘agents’ or external circumstances’ (Klemenčič, 2014, p.400). By extension this could imply that AOs are likely to be more influential because of their position and the permanent nature of their roles. How AOs interpret and operationalize their roles is therefore an important factor in understanding how and why SUs organise and operate in the way that they do. Role theory suggests that roles and responsibilities are open to interpretation by both the role holder and those with authority over the role (Frink and Klimoski, 2004). This suggests that how officers perceive and operationalize their role and responsibilities is an important consideration in attempting to understand their decision-making choices and preferences, and the dynamic between officers.

This section has positioned SUs in relation to their historical context and the wider political context, highlighting the link between SUs and student political activism and how this has shaped SU identities, the way unions are perceived by some in positions of power and influence, and by elements of the media. This emphasises the importance of the wider political context for SUs and shows how SUs are vulnerable to political change. The passage of the 1994 Education Act illustrates this point by showing how government can impact the role and purpose of SUs and their funding. The section also sets out the generic features of SUs as important factors likely to constrain and facilitate SU decision-making choices, whilst acknowledging that any understanding of change in contemporary SUs must also take into account their histories and traditions, and the resources they have at their disposal. The critical analysis of the literature suggests that whilst SUs have a number of functions they operate increasingly as intermediary organisations between students and their HEI. It is suggested that to fulfil this responsibility effectively SUs have to balance the sometimes competing influences of their membership and the influence of their host HEI, both of which shape the way unions organise and operate. The conceptual framework in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999) suggests that in the case of SUs the impact of these imperatives are shaped by the characteristics of membership and the characteristics of the HEI. The literature also suggests that HE policy reform has had a major impact on students and HEIs. The sections that follow consider how HE reform has changed the characteristics of the student body and the institutional context and the implications for SUs.

3.6 HE Reform and the Student Body

3.6.1 Growth and Diversity

The size of the student population in the UK increased significantly in the decades from the 1970s from c14% of the eligible population (Kogan and Hanney, 2000) to c50% in 2012. The impact of this 'massification' (Scott, 1995) on HEIs is covered extensively in the literature. Much of this growth consisted of students from lower socio-economic groups, whose families had no previous experience of HE. Despite this increase students from less privileged working-class backgrounds were still underrepresented (Brown, 2013). The growth in student numbers also included a significant increase in international students (notably in pre 92 universities). This suggests a widening of the range of student backgrounds, finances, and personal circumstances. During the early phases much of the growth was absorbed by post 92 universities. Post 92 universities tend to recruit students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Some suggest that the expansion changed HE in the UK from an elite to a mass HE system which was funded at marginal cost (Williams, 1992).

The impact of growth and the increased diversity of the student body on SUs is under-researched. There is a direct relationship between student enrolments and the size of SU membership – SU membership numbers grow at the same rate as student enrolments resulting in some SUs having in excess of 20,000 members. Like the HEIs that host SUs it is reasonable to assume that most SUs have over the past several decades had to manage significant increases in students (as members). SUs have also had to manage increasingly diverse memberships, for those in post 92 HEIs in particular, as noted early, this includes more students from less privileged backgrounds. Increased diversity also includes students of different nationalities, particularly relevant given the significant increases in international students. The sector has also experienced growth in different modes of study, for example, part-time and post graduate study, although the increase in undergraduate fees and student support arrangements has had a negative impact on this area of recruitment. It can be posited that for SUs diversity is likely to add complexity to their operations. A more diverse membership is likely to contain a wider range of perceptions, views and interests, and needs. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that a larger and more diverse membership makes it more difficult for SUs to create a collective student identity and to identify common grievances (p.400). There are no empirical studies on how SUs engage with what is likely to be a diverse range of student interests, how they aggregate and process student views so as to identify issues and determine priorities for action. It is reasonable to posit therefore that a larger and more diverse membership is likely to add complexity and volume to the demands faced by SUs and to influence the way SUs organise and operate.

3.6.2 The Student as Consumer

The construction of the student as consumer is a central element of HE policy reform and presents a powerful metaphor for shifting student identities (Morley, 2003) from traditional ideas of the student as 'apprentice academic' involved in a learning partnership (Brown, 2013). References can be traced back to government policy pronouncements from the late 1990s notably 'the recognition of the individual [student] as customer or consumer (NCIHE, 1997, p.64, 4.59)' and gained momentum following the introduction of tuition fees in 1997 and further intensified following increases in tuition fees in 2006 and 2012 (Brown, 2013, Molesworthy et al., 2015, Tomlinson, 2017). The consumer model reconstitutes HE as a purchase and reconstructs the relationship between students and their HEI as one of economic exchange (Rochford, 2014). As consumers students are protected in law with rights to challenge their HEI for failure to deliver on their consumer promise. The consumer narrative promulgated by government places a strong emphasis on value for money, which is translated as students obtaining a good job once they have graduated (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The 'active reconceptualization of students as consumers of higher education' (Naidoo, 2008) reinforced by the shift in funding from government to students represents a move to a client-based system that assumed that students' preferences and behaviours would drive change in HEIs (Deem, 2004).

A key government assumption is that students as paying 'customers' know what is in their best interest and that they will assess the value of courses and providers with reference to quality and price (Brown, 2013). This belief draws on Public Choice Theory, which assumes that students will act as rational choosers and HEIs as providers of HE services (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2018). As consumers students will choose the course and HE provider that meets their needs with reference to both quality and price. Brown (2013) notes that the decision by all HEIs following the increase in fees in 2012 to charge up to or close to the maximum £9000 fee effectively removed price as part of student choice leaving quality and other factors as the basis of student choice. Policy makers assume and promote the belief that students' prime motivation for investing in HE is to secure a better job and the potential for higher earnings, and that this is the primary driver for student choice.

In order to make their choice prospective students need publicly available, timely and reliable information about HE providers and the courses they offer. Successive governments have increased the requirements on HEIs to provide information and more recently that information should be accessible and easy to assimilate (Brown, 2013). Brown (2007) describes these efforts to provide information to students as the 'information fallacy' and argues that as an experience or post-experience good

the value of HE cannot be determined or measured until after or long after it has been experienced. Others challenge the notion of students as 'competitive economic actors' (Naidoo and Williams, 2015, p.213) who demand value for money (cf. Woodall, Hiller and Resnick, 2014 on the complexity of student value as a phenomenon). Despite these perceived shortcomings research suggests that in recent years prospective students (and their parents) have come to place greater reliance on published information about courses and providers, for example, information produced in league tables (King et al., 2008) and the annual National Student Survey (NSS), in making their choice.

Student choice, as promoted by policy makers, can suggest that the sector is a level playing field consisting of a range of providers distinguished by their mission. Some authors suggest that this oversimplifies the hierarchical nature of the sector. Some distinguish between elite or selecting HEIs (mainly pre 92 HEIs who are also research intensive) with high entry requirements and a surfeit of applicants and recruiting HEIs (mainly post 92) who compete for their share of the remaining demand (Naidoo, 2008). How HEIs compete is determined largely by their position in this hierarchical and stratified system (Brown, 2013). Others suggest that this also brings into question the notion of student choice, which they argue is constrained by a number of factors, primarily entry qualifications, which tend to impact disproportionately on students from less privileged socio-economic groups (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The implication is that 'recruiting' institutions enrol students from less privileged backgrounds and this is reflected in the SU constituency. This poses a question about how the socio-economic profile of the student body impacts on the way SUs organise their resources and operate. Rodgers et al. (2011) suggest that students in post 92s have different needs and expectations from those in pre 92s with the former generally requiring more financial and welfare advice and support. What seems clear is that student choice is constrained and is likely to impact on student behaviours and attitudes towards HE.

There are few empirical studies that analyse student behaviours from the students' perspective (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2018, Tomlinson, 2017). The literature tends to cite actions by HEIs, for example, additional spending on recruitment and marketing activities (Brown, 2013) as a proxy for increasing student consumer orientations. A UK 'cross-national and cross-institutional study' of 2011 and 2012 undergraduate entrants tested student attitudes toward the notion of the student as a consumer of HE (Tomlinson, 2017). The results suggested that at one extreme students had embraced the consumer ethic and adopted an 'active service-user attitude' (p.457) whilst at the other they resisted consumerism as being inappropriate in the HE context. The majority of respondents expressed a balanced view articulating the need for a return from their HE experience whilst recognising that they also had a role to play in making their experience a success. The need to

get a return and value for money was a general concern expressed by all respondents, and this appeared to have intensified following the increase in fees in 2012. The findings revealed that the notion of the student as a consumer was shaping student perceptions of their relationship with their HEI (Tomlinson, 2017). The study sample was small however it covered the year before and the year after the introduction of the £9000 tuition fee in 2012. This link between the rise in tuition fees and the increase in consumer attitudes is consistent with the results of other studies which suggest that students have become more assertive since the increase in tuition fees in 2012 (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b). Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) indicate that respondents (SU officers) stated that the increase in tuition fees had heightened student concerns about obtaining value for money from their HE experience, and that this was reflected in student attitudes towards their SU. Whilst some argue that students have other values (Skeggs, 2014) the main body of literature suggests that the 2011 reforms have intensified the dominant consumer narrative and that student identities increasingly align with consumer attitudes and behaviours and that whilst all students may not share this universally the trend suggests a strengthening of student consumer attitudes towards HE.

Changing student attitudes and behaviours are likely to impact on how they view their SU and what they expect from it. Some empirical studies of SUs (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015, Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a) have adopted a consumerist lens locating SUs within the wider context of the 'neoliberal' university. Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015b) suggest that SUs face 'a pervasive consumerist agenda' and that SUs have to work within the context of this dominant discourse (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b, p.1). In this context it is suggested that students act more like consumers buying a service and that this is consistent with a 'consumerist mentality' (Scott, 2009). Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) argue that students are more self-interested and conceptualises this as the primacy of 'self' (p.13). As consumers students focus on 'self' (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015) and tend to be concerned more about issues that have a direct impact on their own HE experience rather than collective issues affecting the student body as a whole. This individualism disaggregates the student body (Rochford, 2014). This is consistent with others who suggest that 'students' lives become directed towards self-interest and acquisition' (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b, p.5) and that students are more individualistic, which is reinforced by a strong culture of individualism in wider society (Klemenčič, 2012, p.18).

If students are more self-interested and individualistic then it is likely that this will shape their demands and expectations of their SU. Students seeking value for money from their HE experience are likely to be focussed on issues that impact on their immediate experience at their HEI. The implications are that students are more likely to be focussed on local issues, those that have a direct impact on their

individual experience. This suggests a number of implications for SUs. Firstly, this shift to local issues is likely to shape SU agendas and priorities. Secondly, student issues are likely to be short term and require immediate attention. Thirdly, it is likely to shift SU resources away from national campaigns or campaigns that deal with medium to longer term collective student issues (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). With regard to the latter there is also the potential for tension between local and national policy decisions promoted by the National Union of Students (NUS). The NUS has generally and consistently positioned itself in opposition to the consumerist approach to HE (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b).

Increasing student consumer orientations have changed the way SUs organise and operate. The literature suggests that the most significant response by SUs has been a reorientation of functions to emphasise their role as the representative body for students (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). It is suggested that this re-orientation can be explained in terms of a response to changing student preferences and consumer behaviours (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015, Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). The study by Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) includes interviews with SU staff and elected officers and presents changes in SU functions and interview responses as evidence of the changing attitudes of students. The data was collected between 2008 and 2011, prior to the rise in tuition fees to £9000 in 2012. Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) suggest that the focus on education representation and student community activities can also be explained, at least in part, by the significant decline in commercial income experienced by most SUs since the millennium. Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) suggest that SUs can no longer rely on member loyalty and unions have to work much harder to secure and retain student support for their activities in a more marketised and competitive environment (p.12). The study by Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) come to similar conclusions on the shift by SUs towards representation and draw on an analysis of data from questionnaires and focus group sessions with senior institutional managers and SU officers from a representative group of HEIs. The data was collected in 2013 the year following the increase in tuition fees. Both studies suggest that the shift in SU functions towards representation and membership services is a universal trend (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, Rodgers et al., 2011, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). In an earlier study Rodgers et al. (2006) found that all unions in their survey rated their 'governance-related representation role' as their primary function, which suggests that representation continues to be a priority for SUs. They also suggest that, at least in part, they could be a response to external pressure from government and its agencies who promote the representation function as the primary role of SUs. These studies do not reveal how changing student preferences have impacted on the way SUs manage their representation function, how they engage with students, and how they aggregate issues and translate these into decision-making choices and actions.

The expansion and marketisation of HE has transformed the characteristics of the student body with major implications for SUs. What seems clear is that most SUs are managing larger and more diverse memberships however there is limited understanding of how this change impacts on the way unions organise and operate. It would be reasonable to assume that SUs have had to build management and administrative capacity to address the volume and complexity that the increased size and diversity of their membership implies. The literature has more to say on the impact of the student as consumer and suggests that SUs have reoriented their functions towards representation as a response to this phenomenon. To effectively fulfil their representative function SUs have to interact with their host HEI and the localisation of student concerns and issues suggests that it is likely that this interaction will take place on a more regular basis. This poses a number of questions including how HE reform has changed the characteristics of HEIs and how SUs engage with their host HEI. With this in mind the following section critically analyses the literature on how HE reform has impacted on the institutional context in which SUs are embedded.

3.7 HE Reform and the Institutional Context

3.7.1 Modernising Higher Education Institution Management

Government attempts to improve perceived inefficiencies in HEI management is not a new phenomenon. These efforts can be traced back to concerns raised in the Jarratt Report (1985) commissioned by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) 'to promote and co-ordinate a series of efficiency studies of the management of universities.' Polytechnics and Colleges were at that time under local authority control. The report called for universities to take a more managed approach to the use of resources, seek value for money and identify those responsible and to be held accountable for decisions. It is suggested that these recommendations represented attempts at shifting the culture of HEIs (McNay, 1995, Deem, 2004). A particular focus was the need to manage academic activities and academic staff. The transfer of responsibility for operational and strategic matters to HEIs from 1992 gave HEIs more autonomy at a time when institutions were being required to manage cuts in funding and this further heightened government concerns. A constant throughout was government belief that universities were capable of greater efficiency and that this could be achieved through better management and the adoption of private sector management practices and technologies. This pressure on HEIs to modernise their management was evident in later reports (Lambert Report, 2003) that criticised HEIs for the slowness of their decision-making processes and proposed, amongst other

recommendations, a shift away from committees and towards more executive decision-making.

Government insistence on stronger management in HEIs continued throughout the HE reform period and was facilitated by changes in funding arrangements and regulation aimed at bringing about change in HEIs. The literature notes that these were part of wider attempts to modernise public service provision (Clarke and Newman, 1997, Exworthy and Halford, 1999) which emphasised the need to change cultures (Du Gay, 1997). At the same time HEIs were subject to greater accountability through, for example, external audit of their activities (Power, 1997) and to increasing market competition. Attempts at a stronger management culture in HEIs were largely driven by sector agencies, notably HEFCE which played a pivotal role in devising and implementing changes in funding policies and processes and policing institutional compliance with regulatory requirements, whilst at the same time as monitoring the financial health and sustainability of institutions. In this respect the literature perhaps understates HEFCE's role in overseeing the introduction of practices imported from the for-profit sector. Increasingly HEIs faced new regulations from multiple agencies and more intensive competition for students and resources. In response HEIs changed their governance and management structures and implemented stronger management controls.

3.7.2 Executive Decision-Making, Managerialism and Professionalisation

A major element of new governance and management arrangements in HEIs was the development of executive decision-making structures. These structures challenged traditional notions of university governance, which 'involved consultation of academics by academics informally and through committees…' (Deem, 2014, p.112) and reflected a community of scholars governed by scholars with the Vice Chancellor (VC) providing academic leadership. Collegial structures were more common in pre 92 universities but this was not the tradition in post 92 universities, the former polytechnics. Polytechnics operated under local education authority control until their incorporation as independent organisations in1988. King (2006) suggests that the history and practices in polytechnics made it easier for government to introduce stronger regulation and facilitated the shift to stronger management in HEIs.

The development by HEIs of executive management structures transformed decision-making processes in institutions (Hensby, 2013, Deem, 2004). These structures located authority and responsibility for decision-making with the VC and the senior management team. In this model of decision-making the VC as chief executive officer of the institution chaired a senior management team, typically

including senior academic managers, for example, Pro Vice Chancellors, and senior administrative managers, for example, the Director of Finance (Deem, 2004, Marginson and Constantine, 2000). Senior management teams have responsibility for strategic matters and centralised control over the allocation and oversight of resources (Deem, 2004). Under these arrangements senior managers tend to have authority and responsibility and are held accountable for a functional area(s) or strategic initiative at institutional level, for example, Finance or Learning and Teaching. In this model of management senior managers usually have a degree of autonomy for decision-making and control of specific resources. The VC is responsible and accountable to the governing body of the HEI. The governing body usually includes external members, predominantly from the private sector, who form the majority of the membership. Executive decision-making structures tend to exclude what under more collegiate governance arrangements would be regarded as key constituencies, that is, academic staff and students.

For some the shift to executive decision-making is consistent with notions of the 'managerialist university' (Scott, 1995, Temple et al., 2014). Managerialism or what Deem (2004) refers to as 'New Managerialism' represents an approach to managing HEIs based on practices developed in the for-profit sector. It is suggested that these new management practices and processes have permeated HEIs (Shepherd, 2017). The key features of this phenomenon are the import of private sector management practices and technologies and the devolution of responsibilities, particular for budgets, to lower levels in the institution (Deem and Brehony, 2005). It is suggested that this signifies attempts to establish a management culture and a rational approach to management, that includes strategic planning and objective setting, a strong line management function, which includes the performance management of employees, the adoption of HR management techniques to secure employee commitment, a shift from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes, and more measurement and quantification of outputs, for example, through performance indicators (Shepherd, 2017, p.1669). A central feature is hierarchical management structures with strong line management that ensure the devolution of responsibility and accountability. The drive for efficiency becomes a management imperative. It is suggested that managerialism is a response to a number of external pressures including increased regulation, the need for public accountability, funding changes, and increased competition for students and resources (Shepherd, 2017).

Some argue that managerialism in HEIs strengthened in response to more intensive competitive pressures following the rise in tuition fees and the introduction of the NSS in 2006 (Temple et al., 2014). The NSS initiated a greater focus by HEIs on student satisfaction and the student experience. Temple et al. (2014) suggest that the student experience gained traction in debates following the introduction of

tuition fees in 1998. It is suggested that the student experience has since developed from a focus on improving students' educational experience to improving 'the totality of a student's interaction' with their HEI (Temple et al 2014, p.3). This provided a focus for senior management teams and intensified concerns about competition, student recruitment, and reputation management, whilst also responding to the student as consumer to ensure that they received value for money (Temple et al., 2014). One result of this concern about the student experience has been a general trend in HEIs to increase spending on student facilities outside of learning and teaching.

Stronger management in HEIs has also led to an increase in the number of professional managers employed by institutions. This is not a recent phenomenon and can be traced back to the requirement in HEIs for additional professional expertise and knowledge following the transfer of responsibilities for strategic and operational matters in 1988 (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2011). In the intervening period this professionalisation has gained momentum as new functional areas, for example, marketing, have developed in response to competition and regulatory demands. Some also suggest that professionalisation in HEIs is part of a wider professionalisation in society and the economy and point to a number of factors that have contributed to this phenomenon, including developments in ICT and the knock on for 'administrative systems for dealing with financial, personnel matters and computerised systems in the administration of the student body.' (Gornitzka and Larson, 2004, p.467). Whatever the reasons for this change the impact of these professionals, more commonly referred to as professional services managers, on institutional decision-making and design is under-researched.

There is a small body of literature on professionalisation in HE which focuses on the professionalisation of general administrators (Gornitzka and Larson, 2004, Rixom, 2011). Whilst this literature provides valuable insights into the professionalisation process it excludes consideration of other professional staff in HEIs, for example, Marketing Directors, Directors of Estates. This exclusion leaves a gap in understanding the impact of professionalisation. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that organisations have become important sites for professional development (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). This suggests that the success of professional groups is likely to depend on how well they are able to dominate and exploit their position in organisational hierarchies and through the control they are able exercise over institutional processes and policies (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.392). This literature provides an understanding of the impact of professionals in organisational contexts (Evetts, 2011) and suggests that professional staff play an increasingly important role in decision-making processes, for example, through the provision of expert advice and the interpretation of information and data (Rixom, 2011). This suggests that professional services

managers potentially represent a new constituency of influence in HEIs. It is reasonable to assume that as interpretations of the student experience widen to include facilities and services outside of teaching and learning SUs are likely to have to engage more with these managers in order to influence institutional policy.

In summary, executive structures, managerialism and professionalisation in HEIs have shifted authority and influence over decision-making away from traditional constituencies represented in more collegial models of governance. Senior institutional managers and heads of professional services represent new constituencies and points of power and influence in these new structures. The former derive their authority from their role and responsibilities. The latter are more likely to exert influence through their specialist expertise and knowledge. Further that as the focus of HEIs shifts to the wider student experience (Temple et al. 2014) professional services areas, for example, estates, are likely to become more important and see their influence strengthened. This potentially adds to the number of influential actors in the institutional context. By extension SUs may have to interact with both senior managers and professional services managers in order to effectively represent the interests of their members.

3.7.3 Institutional Diversity

There are over 160 HEIs in the HE sector (excluding private providers) ranging from small specialist institutions to multi faculty institutions operating across campuses nationally and internationally. HEIs differ in terms of institutional mission, history and traditions, size, location, research intensity, the balance between home, EU and international students, and the resources they have at their disposal. These factors give HEIs a unique institutional profile. The unified HE sector can be 'conceptualised as a system consisting of diverse and stratified sets of institutions' (Naidoo, Shankar and Veer, 2011, pp1143). However, as noted above there are a number of sector wide trends that are evident in most HEIs, for example, a homogenising of governance and management practices which suggest that HEIs are subject to the same environmental pressures. The literature identifies the shift to executive decision-making structures, and stronger management and professionalisation as universal trends in nearly all HEIs. Theoretical debates suggest that whilst these common features may be evident in most HEIs Enders, de Boer and Weyer (2011) suggest that individual HEIs are likely to respond to external policy initiatives in different ways.

Not all HEIs respond in the same way to national policy initiatives. Continued attempts by successive governments to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs perhaps reveals the challenges facing policy makers in achieving desired and

consistent change in the management of HEIs. Principal agent theory, based on rational choice theory, provides a model for understanding the challenges facing policy makers. The government (as principal) wants HEIs (its agent(s)) to act in ways that delivers desired outcomes. The government desires HEIs to operate more efficiently and be more responsive to the needs of students and employers. The theory identifies two issues facing government, firstly, their priorities may differ from those of HEIs, and secondly, that HEIs are almost always likely to have more information than government creating an information asymmetry. HEIs wanting to pursue their own priorities may use this asymmetry to their advantage. Successive governments have sought to address these risks by delegating authority to 'independent' regulatory agencies, HEFCE, QAA, OIA, and OFFA. These agencies have particular expertise and knowledge of the HE sector and work closely with HEIs. In contrast drawing on the theory of bounded rationality March and Simon (1958) suggest that the choices made by 'autonomous HEIs' (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2011) are limited by a number of factors including their capacity to collect and assess information as part of the decision-making processes, and historical and cultural factors that may create barriers to change. These factors are likely to influence the way HEIs respond to policy initiatives (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2011). Temple et al. (2014) suggest that HEIs respond in different ways, for example, less research intensive HEIs tended to be more affected by the perceptions of the 'student as consumer' and were focused on the immediate employment prospects of graduates, which contrasted with research intensive HEIs who were focused on NSS and other survey outcomes (Temple et al., 2014). This suggests that whilst the introduction of corporate governance and management structures are universal some HEIs are more corporate than others. The literature suggests that recruiting HEIs, those more exposed to competitive pressures, tend to be more corporate and have more centralised management structures. One explanation is that they perceive a need to manage risks to student recruitment and their reputation. On the other hand, selecting HEIs, typically research-intensive institutions, tend to be less corporate and have retained elements of collegiate governance structures. This is explained in terms of the need to keep research staff engaged and productive.

In summary, despite near universal trends towards executive decision-making, managerialism and professionalisation the literature suggests that some HEIs have embraced these changes more than others (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2011). The literature suggests that HEIs that are more exposed to competition, primarily post 92 universities, will tend to be more corporate than HEIs who select students, pre 92 universities. The literature suggests that the shift from collegial to executive decision-making, managerialism and professionalisation have transformed the institutional context in which SUs are embedded. This suggests that individual SUs may experience institutional contexts with different characteristics. At the same time the localisation of student interests leads to increased interaction between SUs

and their host HEI. The following section critically analyses what the literature says about this relationship and reflects on the implications of a changing institutional context for SUs.

3.7.4 The Students' Union Higher Education Institution Relationship

In order to represent the interests of their members SUs have to interact with their host HEI. This interaction takes place in the institutional context in which SUs are embedded and is shaped by the HEIs 'formal and informal rules, norms and values (Klemenčič, 2014).' Klemenčič (2014) suggests that it is HEIs that determine the 'relational structures' that facilitate SU interaction, formally and informally, with the institution (pp401). Whilst this is largely true it is common practice in the UK for SUs to have representation rights on formal institutional committees. The principle that students should be represented in university governance arrangements was established in the 1970s in response to student campaigning (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013) and since then student representation on committees is 'near universal' (Little, Lock and Scesa, 2009). The formal committee structure in nearly all HEIs is hierarchical (Rodgers et al., 2011). Most HEIs have committee structures headed by a Senate (pre 92 universities) or Academic Board (post 92 universities) which has responsibility for academic policy matters and reports to the institution's governing body. Below the Senate or Academic Board there are usually a number of committees, although these may vary across HEIs (Rodgers et al., 2011) dealing with particular academic areas, for example, research, learning and teaching, and academic standards, which are chaired by senior institutional managers. Below this level and depending on the structure of the HEI are faculty and course committees chaired by Deans or Heads of Department, and course leaders. Students are normally represented on all committees, with SU EOs tending to represent student interests on major institutional committees including the governing body. Membership of the governing body provides opportunities for SU officers to contribute to major policy and strategic decisions and to have access to governors and senior staff (Little, Lock and Scesa, 2009, p.19, Rogers et al., 2011, p.250). Klemenčič (2012a) suggests that HEIs and government desire effective student representation and are likely attribute this role to SUs. SUs normally provide training for student representatives, including EOs, to prepare them for their role on committees. Rodgers et al. (2011) suggest that the provision of training can vary across SUs. SU representation on institutional committees fits with the notion that students are part of an academic community, which is consistent with the communitarian case for student representation (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Some argue that the shift in decision-making authority from collegiate committees, where students are represented, to executive decision-making structures, where they are not, has diminished the influence of students and SUs (Brooks, Byford and Sela,

2015a). It is also suggested that there has been a shift from students being co-decision makers to consultants, particularly for quality assurance (Klemenčič 2014). Further that as SUs are drawn into HEI processes, for example, representation on committees, they become institutionalised (Williams, 2013) 'domesticating' the student voice (Morley, 2003). These developments together with the shift in HEIs to executive decision-making structures would suggest that in order to represent and protect their members' interests SUs have to find ways of engaging with executive structures and influencing senior managers.

In addition to formal relational structures SUs also interact informally with their HEI, through regular meetings between SU officers and senior institutional managers (Little. Lock and Scesa, 2009). Little, Lock and Scesa (2009) suggest from their studies that both parties found these meetings to be useful and challenged views that the relationship between SUs and their host HEI was likely to be adversarial or confrontational. This is consistent with Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) who suggest that relationships between SUs and senior institutional managers tend to be more co-operative. They suggest this is because both parties face similar market-based competitive pressures, heightened by the increase in tuition fees from 2012, and a focus on the student experience and this led to a sharing of values and concerns (p.178). The addition of a question in the NSS in 2012 on student satisfaction with their SU is cited as an explanation for this shift because it opened unions up to the same public scrutiny and competitive forces experienced by HEIs. This suggests that market-led approaches are aligning the values of SUs and HEIs and shaping their relationship. It is important to note that informal arrangements are less prescribed by national practice (Little, Lock and Scesa, 2009) and that practice can vary and is more susceptible to change by the HEI.

Klemenčič (2014) suggests that there are three forms of relationship between HEI and SU representative structures (p.407). An authoritarian-paternalistic relationship is when SUs are integrated as part of the institution, their scope for action is limited, and they fulfil an advisory role. A democratic-collegiate relationship is when SUs are recognised as an autonomous constituency and participate in institutional decision-making. A managerial or corporate relationship is when SUs are treated by their HEI as consultants not as participants in decision-making (p.407). Klemenčič (2014) suggests that market led HE systems tend to push the relationship more towards the managerial or corporate type relationship with SUs treated as consultants not as co-decision makers. This resonates with Rochford (2014) who reports on the experience of SUs in Australia and suggests that SUs in more corporate HEIs are likely to feel more pressure to align with institutional values and interests. This suggests that the more corporate the HEI the more likely they are to perceive their SU as a potential threat or risk to corporate interests, for

example, student recruitment, and therefore need to be managed (Rochford, 2014). This also suggests that the shift by HEIs to more corporate forms of governance is likely to be a key factor in understanding the relationship and interaction between SUs and their HEI. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that '…the less dependent student governments are on their home institutions, the freer they will be from possible intervention and control from institutional leadership (p.401).'

The literature also suggests a number of factors that are likely to impact on the nature of the interaction between SUs and their host HEI. Firstly, the extent to which SUs are free to determine their own agenda. SUs are legally independent organisations, however, they rely on their host HEI for the resources they need to operate (see above). Secondly, how SUs are perceived by their host HEI and its senior managers. Klemenčič (2014) suggest that the cultural attitudes of senior staff in HEIs, how they view legitimacy, power, and authority will impact on the way they perceive their SUs (p.401). Historical factors also shape perceptions, for example, Rodgers et al. (2011) suggest that the fact that a number of SUs have in the past had to be rescued financially by their host HEI brings into question the competence of SUs to manage their financial affairs. This suggests that SUs may have to build the confidence and trust of their HEI in the union and its officers. It would be reasonable to assume that the position of SUs as an important stakeholder group was strengthened vis-à-vis their HEI by the financial empowerment of students following the increase in tuition fees in 2012. Further SUs are also formally recognised as stakeholders by sector agencies, particularly in relation to quality assurance (QAA). This attribution of roles to SUs can be useful in legitimising the position of SUs in HEIs but can also pigeonhole unions and divert their resources.

The literature suggests that outside of formal committee structures the terms of the relationship and interaction between SUs and their host HEI are likely to be largely determined by the institution. SUs enjoy representation rights on formal institutional committees, but their influence has diminished in recent years with the transfer of decision-making power to executive structures. This suggests that in order to be effective as intermediary organisations SUs must find other ways of protecting and promoting their members' interests. It would be reasonable to assume that as a consequence the focus of SU attention is likely to shift from formal committees to executive structures and informal interactions with senior institutional managers.

3.8 Conclusions and Contribution to Existing Knowledge

HE reforms introduced in 2012 have intensified the marketisation of HE in the UK. The literature suggests that students as fee-paying consumers are more assertive and seek value for money from their HE experience. Executive decision-making structures, managerialism and professionalisation have transformed the institutional context within which SUs are embedded. SUs have adapted to these changes primarily by prioritising their representative function and this emphasises their role in intermediating between students and their HEI. As intermediary organisations SUs have to balance the competing logics of membership and influence (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/99) in order to effectively protect and promote the interests of their members. This notion of competing logics provides a conceptual framework for analysing and understanding change in contemporary SUs. The influence of these logics is driven by the characteristics of membership – size, diversity, and consumer-orientation, and the characteristics of HEIs - executive-decision making, managerialism, and professionalisation. It is suggested that these characteristics are likely to influence and shape the way SUs organise their resources and operate.

This review has critically analysed the literature to identify the main elements of HE reforms in the UK, how these elements have changed the national and institutional contexts and the relationships between key actors. The literature on SUs has a tendency to analyse change in SUs at an organisational level. This tends to exclude an understanding of the impact of changes on the roles and influence of SU officers, that is, EOs and AOs. One exception (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a) suggests that AOs have grown in importance at the expense of EOs, however, the study does not expand on the impact of this finding on the way SUs operate. This study assumes that the decisions and actions taken by a SU on how it will organise its resources and operate will largely be the outcome of choices made by its officers, and that these choices are likely to be affected by a number of factors, including; how individual officers perceive and actualise their roles and responsibilities, how they perceive the pressures and priorities faced by their union, their identities, their values and beliefs, their loyalties and interests, the advice available to them and how they receive that advice, and what they consider to be the role and purpose of SUs. It is posited that to understand change in contemporary SUs we need to understand how and why officers' roles are changing, the impact this has on decision-making, and how SUs choose to engage with their members and their host HEI. This study aims to address this gap in the literature.

This study aims to further understanding of change in contemporary SUs from the perspective of the officers who work in unions. The core research question is - **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?**

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

Chapter 4 Methodology (Research Design and Methods)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the context for the study and the research questions (see previous chapter). My ontological and epistemological positions are outlined along with how these have shaped the research design and methodology, and consequently the selection of research methods for the project.

This study starts with the proposition that the purpose, direction, identity, and character of a Students' Union (SU) will largely be shaped by the decisions and actions of its officers, and that these will in turn be influenced by how officers perceive and interpret external contextual factors. The institutional context within which SUs are embedded is necessarily a primary consideration. In order to assess and understand how and why contemporary SUs are changing this study explores the impact of changes in the characteristics of SU membership and the characteristics of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on how SU officers perceive and operationalise their roles and responsibilities, how this impacts SU decision-making and the way unions manage relationships with their student members and their host HEI.

In recent decades the expansion and marketisation of the HE sector has transformed the relationship between students and HEIs. Students have been reconceptualised as consumers and HE has been presented by policy makers as a consumer good or service. Through changes in funding arrangements, particularly the introduction of tuition fees students have been empowered and persuaded by government to demand value for money from their HE experience. Increased competition between HE providers for students and resources has intensified. HEIs have responded by adopting corporate governance structures and management practices and technologies developed in the for-profit sector. These changes have radically altered the relationship between students and their HEI, between students and their SU, and SUs and their host HEI. As the body formally responsible for promoting and protecting students' interests SUs intermediate between students and their HEI. Studies suggest that in recent times SUs have reoriented their functions to focus on their representative role in response to changing student preferences and needs (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015, Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). Some suggest that permanent union staff (appointed officers (AOs)) are growing in importance at the expense of elected officers (EOs) (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). The literature is relatively quiet on the impact of these

contextual changes on how officers perceive and operationalise their roles, SU decision-making, the way SUs engage with students and their host HEI, and what this means for the operation and effectiveness of SUs. This study aims to further understanding of change in contemporary SUs from the perspective of the officers who work in unions. The core research question is - **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?**

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

4.2 Researcher Positionality

The 'position' of a researcher in relation to qualitative research projects has attracted increasing attention in recent decades (Sikes, 2004). Position in this context describes the notion that a researcher conducting qualitative research (and some would argue quantitative research) is involved in a process of interpretation and that this process will necessarily be influenced by their particular experiences, values, and beliefs. In this sense a researcher is part of the social world they are investigating and cannot stand outside of the social setting and that this is likely to influence how they approach a research project (Saven-Baden & Major, 2013). In this respect positionality challenges the notion of objectivity grounded in the natural sciences and quantitative research. This suggests, as Carr (2000) argues, that research in the social sciences and education is very rarely value free. It is argued that a researcher's positionality will be determined by their world view which will largely be formed by their particular values and beliefs. A researcher's values and beliefs will be shaped by a number of factors including their experiences, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race, social class, and political allegiances (Wellington, et al., 2005, and Marsh, et al., 2018). A researcher's world view impacts on their assumptions about social reality and what constitutes knowledge (their ontological position) and the nature of that knowledge (their epistemological position), and the way individuals interact with the social world (Sikes, 2004, Bahari, 2010, Marsh, et al., 2018). A researcher's 'positionality' is therefore determined by their world view and the position they adopt in relation to a particular research project (Foote & Bartell, 2011, Rowe, 2014).

It is argued that all aspects of a research project, the selection of the research topic, the research question, methodology, research method, and the collection and analyse of data are likely to be influenced to some degree by a researcher's positionality (Rowe, 2014) and that this will introduce bias and partisanship into the research process and influence the research outcomes (Rowe, 2014). It is suggested that in order to inform their position and thereby mitigate the impact of bias a researcher should reveal their world view by adopting a reflexive approach to their research (Cohen et al., 2018). In this context reflexivity is more than self-reflection and requires a researcher to be self-conscious and to conduct a self-assessment. It is suggested that by understanding and articulating their position and how this may influence their research a researcher can work to mitigate, but not eliminate, elements of bias or subjectivity (Cohen, et al., 2018). It follows that by presenting the research more transparently in terms of factors that may have impacted on the research outcomes the researcher provides the reader with information to assist them in their assessment of the truthfulness of the research outcomes and the research process (Sikes, 2004).

I acknowledge and recognise that my values and beliefs, particularly my career experience as a senior manager in HE and my experience of SUs (see Chapter 1) are likely to have influenced my selection of the project, the research questions, design and methodology, research methods, and the collection and analyse of the data. With this in mind the sections that follow outline my ontological and epistemological positions as underpinning my approach to the research project.

4.3 Philosophical Assumptions: Critical Realism

4.3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Researchers who seek to explain social phenomena have to decide, as a starting point, on their philosophical position with regard to what constitutes reality and the nature of knowledge, that is, their ontological and epistemological position. Ontological considerations stem from how we view reality, the study of being or existence, our beliefs about the nature of the social world and how it works. Epistemology refers to how knowledge is developed and how we assess what counts as being acceptable knowledge, that is, how we know what we know. Working together they provide the philosophical or theoretical position of the researcher and inform the approach to empirical study, influencing the research design and methodology. There are different ontological positions or views about what constitutes reality and each informs a particular epistemological stance.

There is a debate about how we develop and what constitutes knowledge, which falls into two broad philosophical positions: positivism - with its traditions in the natural sciences, and interpretivism, a reaction and alternative to the positivist

approach about how the social world works. Positivism operates under the premise that the world exists and is knowable and that if properly selected and employed research methods will deliver objective and repeatable results, which are independent of the researcher. The approach allows for explanations of human behaviour that are observable and for predictions to be made and causality to be established. This research tradition usually employs a quantitative method. In contrast an interpretivist or post-positivist epistemology usually, but not exclusively, employs qualitative methods that allow for 'a systematic empirical inquiry into meaning' (Shank, 2002, p.11). This view argues that objectivity cannot be achieved (even in the natural sciences) and that the purpose of research in the social world is to 'search for meanings' through interpretation (Shank, 2002).

Interpretivists argue 'that the human sciences must address people's intentions within given contexts, not simply observe their outward behaviour' (Cousin, p. 9). Often this involves gaining understandings and insights about human behaviour in contexts that are held to be inherently too unstable for reliable predictions to be made. 'Meaning has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted, and hence there is always an interpretative or hermeneutic element in social science' (Sayer, 2000, p.17). The researcher works in the research setting and openly acknowledges the impact of their subjectivity on the choice of research methods, the interpretation of data and presentation of research outcomes or findings. For the research process to work the researcher depends on close relationships with the actors, allowing them to build trust – without which the actors are unlikely to reveal genuine versions of what is happening in the research setting (Cousin, 2009). An extreme or 'pure' version of this interpretivist position is represented by constructivism, which views reality purely as a creation or construction of interactions of individual actors and their understanding or interpretation of their context. It follows that there may be different interpretations of the same reality. The emphasis on interpretation and the opportunity it presents for deep understanding and meaning is identified as a strength of constructivism, and the interpretivist approach more generally. Its weakness is that causation is potentially lost as a consequence of a focus on description. Positivism and constructivism both take a particular ontological position or view of reality. The central issue between the two philosophies is 'whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures, and ethos as the natural sciences' (Bryman, 2012, p.11). What is clear is that a researcher's philosophical or theoretical position will reveal their view of reality and the creation of knowledge and influence the research design and methodology adopted to conduct research about the social world.

My philosophical position and approach are influenced by the interpretivist viewpoint, in so far as I believe that the social world is constructed through and by human interactions and actions. However, I also believe that there is a reality that

exists and impacts on individuals and that this has to be part of any inquiry of particular social phenomenon. This approach is best represented by critical realism (Bhaskar, 1989, Sayer, 1992). In contrast to constructivism, which fails to acknowledge an independent known reality, critical realism assumes that there is a known reality recognising 'the reality of the natural order and the events and discourses of the social world….' (Bryman, 2012, p.12) but that in order to explain the events and structures within this context we need to identify and explain the structures at work that generate those events and discourses (Bhaskar, 1989, p.2). We can summarise the critical realist position as – 'the world is socially constructed but not entirely so' (Easton, 2010, p.120). In this respect reality is more than a linguistic construct. Critical realists could be said to occupy a space close to the positivist position in that they accept that there is a reality that is separate from individuals and adopt causation as an explanatory tool, however, they differ from positivists in so far as they accept that their explanations may not be observable (Bryman, 2012). In this respect a particular notion of cause and effect is a central tenet of the critical realist position, that is, they consider it legitimate to theorise about things that are not observable because they observe the effects. Critical realists accept that gaining understanding of the social world through this process presents challenges because the social world is complex and heterogeneous and that observable events may be the result of a number of causes or factors that are unobservable.

In summary, critical realism can be a combination of explanations and interpretations about what affects human action and interaction in social contexts, in this respect it aims to understand causation by linking agency, structure, and relationships (Archer, 1995). However, there is also the need to acknowledge that critical realism is not a coherent or single theory; it is what Archer (1995) describes as 'philosophically informed metatheory.' This said, three generally accepted facets of critical realism are identified that are particularly relevant to this study; agency and structure, causality, and the link with a phenomenological approach. Each is discussed in more detail below.

4.3.2 Agency and Structure

An important facet of critical realism concerns structure and agency, that is, the relationship and interaction between individuals and structures or objects in the social world (Archer, 1995). Agency refers to how individuals engage with, influence and are influenced or conditioned by their social setting, and how this affects their conscious and unconscious actions and behaviours. To understand the social world critical realists argue that we need to understand the dynamic between agency and the structures that exist in social contexts. Critical realists define 'social reality in terms of structures (conceptualised as emergent properties) and agents

with free will whose actions are conditioned (rather than determined) by social structures' (Cruikshank, 2010). In this way critical realism avoids structurisation (Giddens, 1979) that is, the determining nature of structures over individuals. Social structures are created by the actions of individual actors and then assume a permanency and causal powers that cannot be easily changed (Archer, 1995). Critical realists argue that there are two types of relationship between entities: necessary and contingent, the latter deals with relationships that may affect one another and the former relationships that will affect one another (Easton, 2010, p.120). The relationship between agency and structure is relevant to this study because the research aims to explore the relationships between SUs and other entities that exist and create accountabilities within the social context occupied by SUs, and to explain the effects. The notion that social structures condition the actions of individuals has a particular relevance to the aim of this study as it allows for the exploration of the effects of, for example, HE structures and regulations, HEI requirements, and expectations (conceptualised as 'accountabilities') on the actors in SUs. This is central to answering the research questions.

4.3.3 Causality

Perhaps the central feature of critical realism is explanation - 'To ask for the cause of something is to ask 'what makes it happen', what 'produces', 'generates', 'creates' or 'determines' it, or, more weakly, what 'enables' or 'leads to' it' (Sayer, 1992, p.104). It is important to recognise that causation in this respect is not the same as that represented in the natural sciences, where one variable consistently influences another in a way that is repeatable and can be observed. The focus on causation and the use of causal language, a key tenet of critical realism, are relevant to this study because of the nature of the research questions, which seek to understand what is happening in SUs, how is it happening, and the related effects. Critical realism is particularly suited to 'what' and 'how' questions, in other words seeking to understand through inquiry and interpretation what and how events happen and then moving to offer an explanation as to why they happen by identifying the causes of the events. In this respect 'Events or outcomes are what critical realists investigate' (Easton, 2010, p.120) and in a way that is close to the event. Events happen in the social world and these are observable, however, the cause(s) of these events may be unobservable. Critical realists suggest that the world is differentiated and stratified consisting of events and objects, including structures, which can generate events (Sayer, 1992). Objects and structures are more generally referred to as entities. 'In the case of critical realism the entity should not only be defined but the form of the causal relationship clearly set out' (Easton, 2010, p.120). From this perspective research seeks to increase understanding of the causal links or causal mechanisms between events and provide insights into the structures that may cause these events. Causal mechanism is a broad concept and is more than the formal connections between entities, it relates to

causal powers and what connects entities, and how they combine to cause particular events (Easton, 2010, p.122). Further Sayer (1992) says that the 'same mechanisms may sometimes produce different events, and conversely the same type of event may have different causes' (p.116). For the purposes of this study the characteristics of membership and the characteristics of HEIs are causal mechanisms that impact on SUs. Causation provides the scope to answer the research questions by allowing for the conceptualisation of entities in a social context, that is, those emergent structures that exercise causal powers in relation to SUs and the officers who work in them.

To summarise, we observe events or changes identified as social phenomena and through research of the social world we aim to understand why these events or changes occur in the way they do, that is, what caused the events to happen. These changes are the result of the actions of actors, human and non-human, acting (Easton, 2010). In the social world individuals interact with each other and with social objects or structures, and these entities constrain and condition behaviours and actions. Critical realism provides a philosophical framework for identifying entities, and for understanding the causal relationship between entities and the impact on the actors involved, whilst acknowledging the complexity and heterogeneity of the social context.

4.3.4 Critical Realism and a Phenomenological Approach

Critical realism is relatively tolerant with respect to different research approaches, (Sayer, 2000, Easton, 2010, p.123). The critical realist approach complements and supports the use of a phenomenological approach, 'It justifies the study of any situation, regardless of the numbers of research units involved, but only if the process involves thoughtful and in-depth research with the objective of understanding why things are the way they are' (Easton, 2010, p.119). This fits well with the objectives of this study and the nature of the research questions posed. In support of this Sayer (1992) provides a useful distinction between extensive and intensive research methods, with the latter focused on individual agents in context and the former on wider studies using, for example, large scale surveys. Intensive research methods, for example, interviews using qualitative analysis provide the fit between critical realism and a phenomenological approach.

In summary, critical realism provides a relevant and appropriate philosophical and theoretical fit with the research object and context, and the research questions, and supports the use of a phenomenological approach. These factors impact upon the research design and the methodology for the study, discussed below.

4.4 Research Design

4.4.1 Overview

The research design for a study can be described as an overall plan, decided upon by the researcher, for collecting, measuring and analysing data, that will offer the best chance of answering the research questions posed. The research design 'is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions' (Yin, 2014, p. 2) it is the glue that holds the various elements together. The primary driver therefore in determining the research design or plan for this study was the research questions and the related conceptual framework, taking into account my theoretical position (outlined above). The research design includes the methodology, methods, data collection and analysis, aimed at answering the broad question "how and from what sources do I need to collect data that will best answer the research questions?" The research design also takes into account practical considerations such as the limits of the resources available to the researcher and access to the SUs and officers selected. It is important to acknowledge that these factors may have an impact on the methodology and methods.

The original plan was to conduct 24 semi-structured interviews with officers in six SUs. This is consistent with the often-cited advice of Eisenhardt (1989) that 'while there is no ideal number of cases, a number between 4 and 10 cases will work out well'. The primary aim was to identify a sample that provided a credible and representative population across the HE sector and that would generate sufficient data. To achieve this a purposive, rather than random, approach was adopted. 'Purposive sampling' unlike random sampling techniques used in many quantitative studies, is more appropriate for qualitative research studies because the nature of these studies means that only small samples are used (Sarantakos, 2005). Practical considerations also applied, with the final selection of SUs and officers being dependent upon getting access to, and agreement from, officers in each of the SUs selected. During my 30 years' experience working in HE I have established a number of contacts in SUs and the NUS, and these proved critical in facilitating access to SU officers in the proposed sample.

Following an initial analysis of the data a further three semi-structured interviews were conducted with three External Trustees in three of the sample SUs, two in situ and one telephone interview (bringing the total number of interviews to 27). Also, a review of 30 SU websites was undertaken as a secondary source of data, which provided the opportunity for some triangulation. These were accessed via the Internet for desktop analysis. The plan was to review the websites to test and compare some of the themes emerging from the primary data. This combination of

a desktop research and a purposeful sampling approach served to shape the research design.

4.4.2 A Phenomenological Approach

The starting point was to explore options with a view to deciding on the most appropriate means to address the core topic and answer the research questions. In this respect the aim of the study, that is, furthering understanding of change in SUs by investigating what is going on inside SUs and the research questions posed provided the principal references for the selection of the approach. The approach needed to provide a reliable way of studying the subjects selected within their context and the means to capture the complexity and generate understandings about the social phenomenon being studied. A phenomenological approach provides for an understanding of phenomena from the perspectives of the actors involved. It allows for collection of in-depth information and perceptions usually through qualitative methods including interviews with actors. The research is then presented from the perspective of the actors involved. In this respect the research questions aim to increase understanding of the underlying reasons, accepting that the behaviour of the actors involved will to some degree be determined by their context. The reason why we need to understand the context and study the actors in that context is because 'How people behave, feel, think, can only be understood if you get to know their world and what they are trying to do in it' (Gillham, 2000, p.11). The framework and interview questions took this into account. The interviewees were asked what and how questions which were followed up by why questions with prompts asking for examples to validate the responses. There are different views expressed in the literature about what is referred to as the 'particular' and the 'general', with some arguing that the focus on the general detracts from the particular (Stake, 1994) while others (Eisenhardt, 1989) suggest that the general makes for good theory making.

A phenomenological approach works for a single case, but it is acknowledged that the ability to generalise or make inferences are strengthened by the use of multiple cases from a sample. A weakness of the sampling approach is 'its low (statistical) representativeness' (Easton, 2010, p.119). In contrast to survey methods which usually incorporate larger numbers of respondents providing arguably more representative data. In this respect, the sampling method is sometimes criticised for producing research results that cannot be generalised, because the results come from one or a small sample within specific contexts. Together with the intensity and depth of study it is argued that these factors weaken the generalizability of the findings. What can be regarded as a strength of a sampling approach using in-depth interviews - dealing with complexity and offering rich data in support of understanding, therefore, may be presented as a weakness. The size and

representativeness of the sample, and the evidence base it provides can be offered in mitigation, something I would argue applies to this study, given the number of SUs in the sample and the number of interviews undertaken.

In summary, a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews fits well with the broad research topic of this study and provided an appropriate method for answering the research questions posed. Given my core research question is a 'how' question and the study requires an in-depth understanding of the impact of changes in context on SUs I regard this approach as the most appropriate approach to answer the research questions. The sampling and interview approach facilitated the capture of complexity and provided rich data, which was particularly suited to understanding the dynamics within individual SUs and their external relationships, which would not be have been possible through the use of statistical analysis or controlled experiments. Also, the approach was selected because it complements my critical realist ontological stance and fits with the broad aim of the research project, that is, to generate rich understanding about what is happening inside contemporary SUs through description and interpretation.

4.4.3 The Sample

Given that the history, traditions, and cultures of SUs can be closely related to their host HEI the sample included SUs based in pre- and post-92 universities, post-92s being those institutions granted university status following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Two of the pre-92 universities were Russell Group members, and the two post-92 universities were members of the 94 Group of universities. The sample also included two SUs with a history and tradition of being politically active at a national level. The selection process for politically active SUs was in part a response to a theme emerging from the review of the literature. The sample also represents SUs in terms of size of membership and financial turnover – based on a categorisation of 'small – medium – large'. The criteria used for the selection process is illustrated in table 1.

Table 1 Students' Unions Selection Criteria

Students' Union	Pre 92	Post 92	Size (Small, Medium, Large)	Politically active
SU 1	X		M	
SU 2		X	S	
SU 3	X		M	
SU 4		X	L	
SU 5	X		L	X
SU 6	X		M	X

For the purpose of the study SU officers were divided into two groups; elected (EOs) and non-elected officers (permanent union staff), the latter being represented by the SU Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The division reflects a difference in the status, roles and responsibilities of the post-holders. In determining the sample, I wanted to ensure that the EOs interviewed held similar or comparatively similar roles, so that credible comparative analysis could be made across the sample SUs. The EOs selected were all full-time paid sabbatical officers. Three EOs were interviewed in each of the sample SUs, including those holding the position of President, as this role was viewed as being more senior to other EO roles. Not all SUs have Presidents, and this was reflected in the sample – with one of the six SUs not having a President or equivalent role. The sample also included EOs who were serving a second one-year term of office, as a more experienced group. The interviews were deliberately scheduled to take place toward the end of the academic year when EOs were coming to the end of their term of office and were able to reflect more meaningfully on their experiences.

The decision to adopt a purposive sampling approach took into consideration practical considerations relating to gaining access to SU officers. Using a close professional contact with excellent access to a national network of SU CEOs I was able to build the sample of SUs and then, following an introduction by the CEO, gain access to SU officers. All of the CEOs in the sample were keen to help with the study and spoke to their elected officer group, effectively selling the value of the project, prior to me selecting and contacting officers directly via email. Once these initial introductions were made I corresponded with all the officers individually via email. I know through my own experience that EOs spend a lot of time out of the office, which can make engagement difficult. As a deliberate strategy I managed an early introduction to the SU administrator in each SU. SU administrators have wide ranging formal responsibilities that include co-ordinating diaries and booking spaces, they also can exert significant informal influence over officers, for example, through reminding, prompting, and calling in favours. I

spoke to all the administrators via telephone early in the process and on a number of occasions during the interviews to confirm that arrangements were in place and that interviewees would be turning up as scheduled. A key objective was to achieve 100% participation by the officers, which presented a number of practical challenges, particularly with regard to EOs whose schedules and general work routines could be less planned and more spontaneous than the CEO. It was recognised that less than 100% participation would weaken the strength of the data and the validity of any findings, so considerable effort was invested early in the process to identify and build rapport and relationships with officers and others in the SUs who could offer practical support. Establishing a relationship with the administrators at the start of the process was critical to achieving 100% engagement by officers. The administrators arranged and co-ordinated interview times, through shared SU diaries, and booked rooms for the interviews to take place in. Administrators proved to be a critical link, and lesson learnt, in making sure officers turned up at the agreed times.

Toward the end of the interview schedule following an initial analysis of the data, the role and influence of External Trustees on SU Trustee Boards emerged as a common and recurring theme. It was decided that further data should be collected as evidence to inform and support this theme. Subsequently the sample was extended to include three semi-structured interviews of External Trustees, one post 92 university SU (L), and two pre-92 university SUs (M and L). This decision is consistent with the qualitative approach maintaining flexibility to amend the process during practical implementation.

4.5 Methodology

The research methodology provides the best means of answering the research questions by providing a structure and set of principles or rules that guide the choice of research methods. In broad terms there are two methodological approaches for the collection of data: quantitative or qualitative, the former is best suited to questions about how many or how much, and the latter to what, how, and why questions about social phenomena (Cousin, 2009). These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and each has its own preferred methods for collecting data. A quantitative approach normally involves the collection of data that allows for the presentation of data in numbers or quantifiable facts, quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency from, for example, structured surveys, controlled experiments: and is less concerned with context. This approach is often associated, but not exclusively, with scientific or economic research. In contrast a qualitative approach involves an empirical study that is focused on sense making and meaning within a specific natural context and usually involves the presentation of findings in the form of words. This approach is associated with studies of the social world and the socially

constructed nature of reality, with researchers who locate themselves closely to the social phenomena being studied. Recording the perspectives of the actors involved is central to the data collection process as is the interpretation of the data in developing an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. A qualitative approach is appropriate for studies where the researcher is involved in both the collection and interpretation of data, usually through inductive analysis with a focus on meaning making by respondents (Cousin, 2009). Given the nature of the research questions posed and the type of investigation proposed, a qualitative methodological approach was deemed the most appropriate.

The qualitative approach has a number of strengths, which are particularly relevant to answering the research questions. It provides for depth and detail through the recording of views, perceptions, reflections, feelings and behaviours within specific natural contexts that allow for understanding rather than simple description of events. It is flexible, allowing actors to expand their responses, which can lead to new lines of enquiry and themes as findings emerge. It centres on meaning and sense making and allows interpretation by the researcher, whilst accommodating the complexity of the subject and context.

In summary, I decided upon a qualitative approach for this study because it supports my ontological and epistemological positions (outlined above) and offers the best means of collecting data that will allow me to make sense and develop an understanding of how contemporary SUs are adapting and evolving, and thereby answer the research questions. The research design and methodology for the study (outlined above) reflects the nature of the study and is driven by the research questions. The research methods used to collect the data are discussed below.

4.6 Research Methods

There are a number of methods for collecting data associated with a sampling approach including: semi or unstructured interviews, analysis of documentation, and observation, which is time consuming. Unstructured interviews tend to record conversations that occur naturally, without a formal structure. Given the need to collect the in-depth views and perceptions of SU officers this type of interview was not thought to be appropriate for this study. Semi-structured interviews offer the researcher flexibility in so far as they can be adapted to a given context and to findings as the research proceeds. Given the objective of the study, the research questions and the time and resources available semi-structured interviews were chosen for collecting the primary data for the study with a review of SU websites planned for the collection of secondary data that would allow for some triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were viewed as the best way of

developing in-depth accounts of experiences and perceptions and thereby allow the research to produce rich empirical data about the social phenomenon being studied (Cousin, 2009, p.71).

I believe that face-to-face interviews provide the best opportunity to build the trust of research subjects and to generate 'genuine' responses. On the surface the interview process might be regarded as straightforward (Cousin, 2009) a simple process of asking questions and recording responses. I agree with Cousin (2009) that 'Gathering and representing people's experiences is fraught with difficulties' (Cousin, 2009, p.73). By being aware of this I was able to mitigate some of those difficulties. I was conscious, as the researcher, of the need to listen, so as to avoid dominating the interview, referred to by Rubin and Rubin (2005) as 'responsive interviewing' and what they refer to as 'hearing data'. Power asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewee was also addressed, by adopting a relaxed conversational style and building rapport early in the interview.

Consideration of data from more than one source can allow for the testing of findings from primary data. This 'triangulation'- an attempt to compare different data sources 'to counteract various possible threats to the validity of our analysis…' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, p.199) provides the researcher with a source of evidence against which to compare the analysis of the primary data. A sample of SU websites allowed for the testing of some of the findings from the analysis of interview data. A particular focus being a comparison of information and statements made on the website with the understandings drawn from interview data.

SU websites are a primary means of communication with students and prospective students. They provide information on governance, student activities, and opportunities for students to engage with the SU, and reveal the way the SU operates and its priorities and successes. SU websites appear to be becoming increasingly important as a means of communication with student members. Analysis of SU websites provided a useful way of triangulating and verifying accounts given in interviews and as a way of validating themes identified through analysis of the primary data.

In summary, two research methods were adopted to collect data, semi-structured interviews and a review of SU websites. Semi-structured interviews were used because they provide for greater depth, and the flexibility to pursue lines of enquiry as a response to unanticipated responses. This would not have been possible using structured or unstructured interviews.

4.7 Data Collection

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted, one with the CEO and three with EOs (including the President where this post existed) in each of the six SUs in the sample. The aim was to interview elected and appointed officers holding similar positions with similar responsibilities so as to allow for comparison. The timing of the interviews were scheduled toward the end of the EOs term of office, so that they were able to reflect meaningfully on their experiences, having been in office since the previous July, but not too close to the end of their term when they were likely to be distracted by the handover to newly elected officers and their plans for the future. The sample offered a representative range of SUs across HEI groupings in the HE sector and provided a coherent sample allowing some opportunities for comparative analysis. I believe this provided for a credible evidence base for the collection of data and in support of any conclusions made. The interviews were scheduled and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes so as to provide a rich source of data.

All interviewees were contacted well in advance of their interview date and were provided with full details of the aims of the research study and its objectives through an interview protocol and consent form (See Appendix A) that guided them through the process and their engagement, emphasised the confidential nature of interview conversation, and confirmed that published findings would be anonymous and non-attributable. All of the interviewees were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time and were reminded of this throughout the study. Written consent was obtained from all the interviewees prior to their interview, which confirmed their agreement to be interviewed, for talking on a topic for a sustained amount of time, and for having the interview recorded and the transcript used for the research purposes stated. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, this being the preferred means of capturing meaning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008) and on a one-to-one basis, structured around an interview protocol and guide to allow for broad consistency across interviews whilst allowing for flexibility to pursue interesting lines of enquiry.

Interview questions and prompts (see Appendix B and C) were derived from the research questions and themes that emerged from the literature review maintaining the connection with the purpose of the research study. The interview questions were structured in a way that sought practical examples as a follow up to responses, to take account of the fact that sometimes what interviewees say can be different from what they actually do. Questions and prompts were used to guide rather than rigidly structure the conversation, allowing sufficient flexibility for adaption and modification during the interview and for extending enquiries so as to pursue

emerging themes (Cousin, 2009). This approach allowed for the emergence of important findings that were not originally expected. I acknowledge that the way I presented and framed the questions, the structure of the interviews, and the way I interpreted responses, influenced the data collected. Throughout the interviews and the follow-up processes I was conscious of the need to relate interview questions and prompts back to the research questions and scholarly literature. I reflected after each interview on how it had gone and how I might improve my preparations, questions, etc., for those that followed. Keeping a research diary to record my reflections and views about how the research was going and how well the methods were working proved to be invaluable. The diary was used as part of the data analysis and to confirm the reliability and trustworthiness of my evidence and warrant my conclusions and build trust in my findings. I used a research diary to log the research process and adopted a reflexive approach that explicitly acknowledged my place and potential influence in relation to the research.

I recorded and transcribed all the interviews myself (being able to touch type assisted this process) which was time consuming but allowed me to re-listen to the questions and the interviewees responses, which provided important reminders of the nuances and accentuations, the pauses, and other key features. This allowed me to get closer to the data and facilitated the early part of the data analysis. Draft transcripts were emailed to all the interviewees who were invited to check them for accuracy and to confirm that they could be used as part of the project. All the respondents returned the transcripts verifying the content and confirmed that they were happy for them to be used. I thanked all of the interviewees for giving up their time and for preparing for and attending interviews and for checking the transcripts.

Following early analysis of the data, which suggested that the influence and presence of External Trustees was a significant factor to consider, three semi-structured interviews with External Trustees in three of the six SUs were undertaken.

Throughout the process I was able to maintain my curiosity collecting data contemporaneously rather than in a sequential way. At the outset I accepted that my engagement with the research was likely to open up questions and lines of enquiry leading to important findings that were not anticipated at the outset. Extending the data collection process to include interviews with External Trustees following early data analysis is an example of this process.

4.8 Data analysis

4.8.1 Overview

Researching the social world necessarily involves the researcher, through the interpretation of the data, in the meaning making process, and that consequently the values, beliefs, personal history and experiences of the researcher are likely to influence the judgements made and the findings and conclusions (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). To mitigate this a reflexive approach was adopted and every effort was made to supress bias and freely and openly report on subjectivity throughout the research process. In this respect a number of strategies were adopted including triangulation and asking interviewees to verify their accounts by letting them check transcriptions. The aim was to present sufficient data in a manner that offered plausibility and accounts that demonstrated an analytical approach and that were descriptively rich (Cousin, 2009). This approach provided the basis for analysing the data.

'Data analysis consists of examining, categorising, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining evidence, to produce empirically based findings.' (Yin, 2014, p.132) and in addition 'is to mutually engage empirical data with a theoretical literature and with the researcher's reflections…' (Marks, 2015, p.31). It was acknowledged that during the early stages the quantity of data and the nature of the process for analysing qualitative research can sometimes overwhelm the novice researcher (Cohen, et al., 2007). This is compounded by the fact that 'unlike statistical analysis, there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the novice' (Yin, 2014, p.133). My broad approach followed inductive strategy, developing theory and new knowledge that is grounded in data systematically collected and analysed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The approach to data analysis acknowledged the creative nature of the process, one that involves the researcher in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation.

The danger of trying to organise the data in a descriptive way in direct relation to the research questions was recognised. To avoid this risk I remained close to the data, manually coding the data rather than using computer software. The aim was to identify patterns, insights, concepts and relationships, as a means of developing and building on existing theory and contributing to existing knowledge by generating new understandings and insights. This was a principal aim in analysing the data, the intention being to maintain the connection between the research questions, the literature and conceptual framework and the data collection and analysis processes. Throughout the coding process a focus on what the data was telling me and what it was saying in relation to the literature was maintained.

4.8.2 Coding

Coding is the process that allows the researcher to engage with the data and to organise it in a systematic way to extract meaning (Cousin, 2009). Through the coding process the data is reduced and organised to reveal patterns and to allow for the development of concepts. The data was coded manually because as a novice researcher I wanted to stay close to the data. In this respect I agree with Salanda (2008) 'That there is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give more control over the ownership of the work' (p.22). Throughout the coding process I was conscious of the need to maintain the integrity of the data when reducing it for intelligibility (Cousin, 2009, p.33). The analysis followed three broad stages, or levels of abstraction, in the coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The initial stage involved a general exploration and focus on the text, reducing the data through an 'open' process to define, label, and classify (Auerbach et al., 2003) concepts and related categories, which formed the basic units of analysis. This stage can be regarded as a first pass over what the interviewees have said, what Yin (2014) refers to as 'playing with the data' (p.136) and formulating a means of 'chunking it' as a way of building and revising codes. (Cousin, 2009). The stage that followed provided an opportunity to re-read the text to check the accuracy of concepts and categories with reference to interviewee responses, and to ensure that all the important aspects had been identified. At this stage the relationships and interconnectedness between concepts and categories was established together with the impact and influence of particular conditions or context. The final stage of analysis involved selecting a small number of key concepts that related to all the others and that represented core categories from which the answer to the core research question was developed. This stage of the analysis also provides tentative answers to the research questions. The coding process was time consuming but rewarding and productive in terms of the organisation and interpretation of the data, and at a more general level knowing the data and what it was saying.

Throughout the data analysis process a consistent check on progress against the research questions and the core question and referencing back to the literature and the conceptual framework was maintained. This aspect of the process proved invaluable in keeping the research on track and manageable, and also worked to avoid being drawn down routes of enquiry that were outside the research questions. There was also recognition of the importance of coding the data as an active, continuous and iterative process of meaning making. The size of the sample, six SUs and 27 interviews, provided sufficient data to be able to draw conclusions and generalise (Eisenhardt, 1989). Each transcribed interview was coded and the codes brought together as a summary and set of coded data for each SU. This staged process enabled me to understand each SU in depth through close engagement with

the data, and to establish what was particular to individual unions – themes, behaviours and patterns, before comparing coded data sets across the sample.

4.8.3 Validity and Reliability

How we evaluate the quality of qualitative research and determine what constitutes good research, to guide the researcher in terms of enhancing the quality and the credibility of their research, is a critical consideration. Validity and reliability are well-used and common terms in quantitative research but their applicability to qualitative research is the source of debate. Both terms have their roots in the positivist research paradigm. In quantitative research reliability relates to consistency and repeatability when using the same methodology or research instrument. Validity is achieved by testing the means of measurement. Some argue that validity and reliability, as used in the positivist paradigm, are not applicable to qualitative research and tend to reject the notion that there is a reality external to our perceptions of it. They replace validity and reliability with alternative concepts, for example, Lincoln et al. (1985) offer four criteria for testing qualitative research: credibility – relating to the perception of the actors involved in the research, transferability – the degree to which research results can be generalised; dependability – the need for the researcher to account for the changes in the research context; and confirmability – the degree to which the results could be confirmed by others. Given the critical realist stance underpinning this study validity, reliability and generalisability are used as a means of evaluating the quality of the research and its findings and are discussed in more detail below.

Validity relates to the soundness, trust or trustworthiness of the research process and the credibility of the findings (Golfashani, 2003). It applies to the research design and methods and their application, and to data collection and analysis. The validity of the research design was tested in terms of how well various elements of the study fit together and how they are applied. The validity of data was tested in relation to how well the findings truly represent the phenomenon studied. The credibility of the research can be weakened by factors that threaten its validity, these are categorised in terms of internal and external validity. Internal validity relates to the research design and the interpretation of the data. Claims can be weakened by a design fault and/or if the interpretation of the data is not supportable. External validity relates to the generalizability of the findings whether they have applicability in different contexts. A number of strategies were adopted as part of the research design and implementation, and the collection and analysis of data to avoid these threats. The strategies adopted sought to establish confidence in the research design and the way the research project was conducted, the choice of methodology and the methods and how they were used, and the collection of data and analysis, and that the findings and any conclusions were credible and

could be defended. This clearly related to the context for the research and central assumptions, how the research was conducted, and by documenting the process and procedures for collecting and analysing the data.

Throughout the process of collecting and analysing the data the discipline of referring to the research questions and conceptual framework was maintained to ensure that a focus on the core topic was achieved. All the interviews were conducted during core office hours when it was convenient for interviewees and more likely that they were alert and not overly tired. The interviews were conducted in private and confidentiality was emphasised at the start and the end of the interview, which provided an environment conducive to obtaining true and genuine responses to the questions posed and to avoid participant bias. A good rapport was developed with the interviewees whilst at the same time maintaining a degree of formality to ensure consistency in terms of the structure and implementation of interviews within and across the SUs in the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and sent to the interviewees to allow them to check. This process of feedback was important in checking the validity of the data.

Conscious efforts were made throughout the research project to be open and to acknowledge the role and positionality of the researcher in order to contribute to the trustworthiness of the research process and the validity and reliability of the research findings and conclusions. A broad definition of reflexivity that included reflection and being accountable about personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological and ontological influences and specifically about the data analysis process (Cousin, 2009, p.19) was adopted. The research design and process for collecting and analysing the data is transparent and well documented.

Reliability refers to the repeatability, that is, if a different researcher carried out the same research using the same methods or research instrument would they get the same results. Reliability in this sense is about consistency and in qualitative research there is a focus on internal consistency relating to the application of the research instrument. This required a disciplined approach in terms of managing the application of the process, to achieve consistency in conducting multiple interviews. This was supported by a systematic and reflexive approach involving scheduled time to reflect after each interview – 'a personal de-brief', to question what went well and to use this to rehearse preparations for the next interview. This process of review, reflection and preparation was an integral part of the research process and gives validity to the application of the research instrument.

In summary, testing for the validity and reliability of the research, which I believe is coherent, is presented within a relevant theoretical framework, and avoids anecdotalism. Contrasting or contradictory results across the sample were explored and the various stages of the research were fully documented and empirically grounded. Finally, I have dealt with ethical considerations in a way that are detailed below.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Cousin (2009) offers two good reasons for having a strong ethical framework for a research project; to protect the researcher and the researched and to facilitate the 'thoughtful conduct of the research process and the eventual credibility of the report (Cousin, 2009, p.17).' I support the need for, and the importance of, a strong ethical framework and have outlined my approach below.

I was aware of the potential implications of my actions and adopted a framework used throughout the project to protect me, as the researcher, and the research subjects - those being researched. When conducting the research I gave careful consideration to the impact of the language and tone used, and the messages that I may have given out, to ensure the integrity of what I produced and the likely impact of the research activity and its output (Cousin, 2009, p.17). I believe that this framework provided the discipline necessary to conduct the research in a way that ensured respect for the research subjects and guided the research process giving it credibility. In this respect I support Shank (2002, pp.97-99) who offers four guiding principles; 'do no harm', 'be open', 'be honest', and 'be careful'. Central to this approach is the need for the voluntary informed consent of participants, defined by the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011) as 'the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting under way' (BERA, p.5). Following the ethic of voluntary informed consent (BERA, 2011) an ethical agreement – consent form, was signed and dated by the researcher and the interviewees prior to the interviews. Brief details of the research project, its aims, methods, anticipated outcomes and benefits, contact details, and expected participant contribution, were issued to all the participants with the consent form. This included confirmation that the research would be conducted against the BERA ethical code (see subject associations). Action was taken to ensure that all those involved were aware of the purpose of the research and their particular role within it and guaranteed the confidentiality and the security of the data collected, through compliance with the Data Protection Act and by encrypting the data. The research and its conclusions are presented in a way that protects the anonymity of the SUs selected and those interviewed as part of the research. All the participants were informed of any

changes to the original purpose of the research arising as a consequence of initial analysis of the data. Throughout the process participants were reminded of their right to withdraw their consent at any time. In addition, all the participants received draft transcripts of their interviews for checking before formal data analysis commenced.

Appropriate ethical guidance was followed throughout the engagement with SU officers, to ensure that they were 'treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference. This ethic of respect applied to both the researcher and the individuals participating in the research, either directly or indirectly (BERA, 2011). The approach proposed was submitted to my research supervisors for comment prior to being adopted.

Judgements or conclusions reached were considered carefully before being finalised for inclusion in the thesis to ensure that they were based on, and evidenced by, the data collected. Throughout the project I was conscious that my experience, values and beliefs were likely to influence the way data was collected, interpreted and analysed. To counter this a reflexive stance was adopted and the background of the researcher made clear. The methods for collecting and analysing the data were fully documented and presented

I believe that being funded by or associated with a particular organisation or agency has the potential to constrain or inhibit the researcher, aspects of research and the presentation of findings. In this respect I feel particularly privileged that I am not aligned to any higher education institution for employment or consultancy purposes and that my research is self-funded. This said I consciously tried to avoid personal agendas and politically motivated viewpoints. My approach sought to ensure that I remained mindful of and managed sensitive issues.

In summary, a commitment to ensuring that ethical considerations were present throughout the research and analysis and the presentation of findings and conclusions was maintained.

Chapter 5 Presentation of findings

5.1 Introduction

Students' Unions (SUs) operate within a fast changing and complex HE environment, which in recent decades has been characterised by significant growth in both the number and the diversity of students, the re-conceptualisation of students as consumers or customers, and increased regulation and accountability imposed by the government on more autonomous Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These forces for change have had a significant impact on the way students view their educational experience and their relationship with their HEI. These forces have changed the culture in HEIs to one that is more corporate and executive-led. SUs have had to adapt and evolve in response to these changes. This study looks at the impact of these changes on how SU officers perceive their roles and responsibilities, what this means for their working relationships and SU decision-making, the way SUs engage with their student membership and their host HEI, and the impact on the organisation and effectiveness of SUs. In this study all the elected officers (EOs) were full-time paid sabbatical positions, with nearly all serving a one-year term of office. For the purpose of this study the CEO represents full-time permanent union staff (appointed officers (AOs)). The data for this study was collected through May and June 2016 and was generated from interviews with SU officers across as representative sample of SUs and reflects their interpretations of change in SUs. This study covers the period in HE up to the end of July 2016, effectively the end of the 2015/16 academic year.

The following chapter presents the findings from the study organised in relation to the research questions posed. The first sections focus on SU engagement with students and with their host HEI, how they approach both relationships and why, and who is involved and takes the lead. The sections that follow present the responses of officers to questions relating to their roles and responsibilities, how they believe they are changing, how they work and where they go to for advice, to try to understand who and what influences them, and what motivates them. The final sections concentrate on decision-making and working relationships as a way of understanding the processes and who is involved. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings and their implications as a bridge to the Discussion chapter that follows.

5.2 Engaging with their Student Membership

CEOs commented on how the interests and attitudes of students had changed in recent years, particularly following the introduction of tuition fees and more recently the rise in tuition fees to £9,000 per annum. This perception was shared by

EOs who added that they had noticed a big change in student attitudes and the way they saw their relationship with their university from the time that they had entered HE. Some commented that the students were treated and responded as consumers, and this was common in their HEI. Many said that their day-to-day contact with students suggested that they were much more demanding in terms of their rights and getting value for money, which for many meant getting a good job after graduation.

All the respondents commented on how the increase in the size and diversity of their student membership had necessitated the need for a more professional and managed SU with structures and processes that allowed it to respond to, and deal with, student needs and demands. EOs said how difficult they found it to represent the interests of such a large and diverse student membership, and said they often found themselves trying to reconcile and mediate between conflicting interests. Some said that they had to park their own values and beliefs and remain neutral in order to deal with the range of interests and political positions of various student groups. This finding suggests that increased diversity had contributed to the de-politicisation of SUs.

Maintaining active contact with students had become more of a priority and most of the SUs in the sample had relocated the EO offices to 'front of house' locations so that they were more visible and accessible, as one CEO put it "more student facing" and available on a daily basis. EOs said that this meant that students got to know who they were and that as a consequence the volume of student enquiries and requests for advice and support had increased. There was general agreement that this also gave the SUs a presence in terms of promoting what they were doing and what they had achieved, which in most instances had generated positive student feedback. In support of this approach the majority of CEOs emphasised how important it was for the EOs to be out talking to students to find out what their concerns were and what they felt the SU should be doing on their behalf, something that they had strongly encouraged them to do. They said that this was also working well as a way of letting students know what the SU had achieved for them. There was a strong sense among the respondents that they needed to work to ensure that the SU remained relevant to the day-to-day concerns and demands of students and that they were seen to be acting upon those concerns. All of the CEOs emphasised that the message needed to be clear, that the SU was there for students and that it was their SU. This was a key finding and illustrates how SUs are acting in a strategic way to maintain and increase grassroots student support.

In addition to the above EOs talked about how the union was adopting increasingly sophisticated techniques and processes to collect and translate student opinion and

ideas into campaigns and action, and publicising this through feedback on social media and through the SU website. This demonstrated the extent of SU efforts to encourage student engagement with the union as a major priority.

When asked about levels of student engagement with the SU most of the EOs and CEOs said that in their experience the vast majority of students connected through participation in sports clubs, societies and volunteering, by using cafes and bars, and attending social events. For three of the SUs in the sample this was seen as a positive, that student engagement of any kind legitimatised the SU and that engagement with particular activities might lead to more active participation, as it had for those EOs interviewed in the sample. Most of the CEOs said that their SU was experiencing a decline in income from their commercial activities because of local competition for student custom, which further emphasised the need for student engagement activities. As one CEO put it. *"The more we can demonstrate high demand from students for what we offer and provide the stronger our negotiating position with the university."*

SU websites provide a useful resource for understanding how unions are developing this strategic approach. Websites actively promote a wide range of activities and campaigns and encourage students to get involved. Out of 30 SU websites reviewed all consistently promoted what the SU was doing for students and invited members to get involved by submitting their ideas electronically, and by joining groups in order to shape the SU agenda and policy. All the websites included photographs and profiles of individual EOs and the EOs as a team, with open invitations to contact them. Many websites include manifesto promises and the progress EOs were making toward delivering on them. The promotion of the SU as a student-led organisation was strongly conveyed. What was very noticeable was the absence of any reference or mention of the CEO or other members of full-time office staff. This was an important finding and demonstrated the strategic way in which SUs manage their engagement with students.

The majority of EOs and CEOs said that poor turnout at SU elections made unions vulnerable to questions about their value and continuing relevance and whether it had the confidence of t student membership. This was particularly relevant to the university's perceptions as the major, if not the sole, funder of the union. As a consequence, significant efforts had been made by the unions in the sample on the build-up to officer elections to encourage students to get out and vote.

A key finding was the practice by all the unions in the sample of ensuring that conversations, communications, and connections with the student membership were

predominantly fronted by the EOs. It was the EOs who were charged with listening to student ideas and concerns, feeding them back to the team and translating them in to proposed actions. Every effort was made to convey the message that the union was led by students and for students. The respondents said that this approach was important to the identity and purpose of the union.

5.3 Engaging with their Higher Education Institution

When asked about relations with their host HEI EOs and CEOs in most of the SUs in the study said that one of the difficulties they faced was that some senior staff in the institution were unclear about the role and purpose of the SU, its democratic nature and officers' responsibilities. It was common for senior staff to think that the CEO managed the EOs as employees of the union and was responsible for their actions. This often led to CEOs being asked by senior university staff, and sometimes by the Vice Chancellor, to bring the EOs into line. CEOs said that it was not uncommon to have to explain to senior staff that it was the EOs who were responsible for the union, and that they had the mandate and authority of the membership.

" I found that when I first joined [as CEO] I suddenly started getting invites to all these meetings and I was very conscious to go to them and when I got there to turn round and say thanks for the invite, great to be here, but really my President needs to be here as well cos ultimately you want their opinion not mine." (CEO SU pre-92)

This perhaps reflects the cultural shift and managerialist nature of HEIs and the expectation of similar executive structures within SUs. It also perhaps reflects what some respondents said about the attitudes of some senior staff, usually those who had been in higher education for most of their careers, which appeared to be based on their memory of the SU when they were a student.

CEOs said that they were often in a position of brokering between the SU and the university, 'tipping the HEI off', usually through a trusted senior member of staff, if there was an issue bubbling up in the union and tipping the EOs off if the institution had an issue.

When asked about the current state of relations with their HEI a majority of CEOs in the sample said they were good, with a minority adding that it had been poor but that it was improving through their directed actions. Responses from most of the

EOs supported this view and some talked about collaborative working and partnership. There was a general consensus that it was better to be sitting around the table talking than protesting outside the Vice Chancellor's Office, although many respondents were quick to point out that the latter remained an option. Overall, there was a sense of needing to work in partnership with their HEI in order to achieve the union's objectives and protect the interests of student members. The respondents commented on the need to be professional in the way they worked and their behaviours, particularly when dealing with HEI senior staff and governors. EOs from more politically active SUs in the sample were cooler about the relationship and feared being seen to be too cosy with the university, as the following quotes illustrate.

"…….at the moment I think a lot of students' unions are basically in bed with the university, and there's not the resistance that there used to be, and needs to be… I think." (EO, SU pre- 92)

"We sit in the middle of it all……students on one side the university on the other….as an officer team." (EO SU post-92)

All the SUs in the sample took a managed approach to their relationship with their university, which seemed to have been embraced by all the respondents. This meant ensuring that officers presented a consistent front on union policy decisions and agreed actions. There was a strong sense of collective responsibility amongst CEOs and EOs, and respondents commented that this was promoted through training and induction, and management meetings. As one CEO said:

"It's important for our credibility and success that we're all singing from the same hymn sheet". (CEO, post-92)

This was supported in some unions by the systematic recording and collection of records of meetings between union officers and senior staff, and HEI committees and working groups, as a means of keeping track of issues and creating an organisational memory. All the respondents agreed on the need to manage their relations with their HEI in a structured and tactical way through targeted engagement with senior managers and committees. The responses from most of the CEOs confirmed that they made sure that all meetings with senior institutional staff and committees were recorded and that de-briefing and briefing of the team – EOs and permanent staff - took place on a regular basis.

CEOs said, and this was confirmed by EOs, that the union had had to up its game in terms of providing information and data, and increasingly evidence of student support, to give credibility to its requests for resources to their HEI or to influence HEI policy. This was regarded by CEOs as a recent and growing HEI expectation. This evidence-based approach was a consistent theme throughout the sample. The respondents emphasised the importance of researching issues and presenting evidence when they engaged with the university. Some of the unions had, or were in the process of, appointing professional research officers, or equivalent, to support this function. As one CEO said:

"In order to get the HEI to listen, we increasingly have to present convincing well-researched facts and figures". (CEO, pre-92)

The following represents the views of a number of EOs:

"If we present a really articulate well-evidenced argument then we've got a pretty good chance of bringing about some pretty good change." (EO SU post-92)

Other respondents added that they had often used the results of the university's own student satisfaction surveys or the NSS to support their proposals and influence decision-making.

All of the EOs said how slow HEI decision-making processes were, but some said that there were issues, predominantly those not requiring formal committee approval, that they could resolve more quickly through informal contacts. Some EOs, predominantly Presidents, said they could "push the nuclear button", meaning that they could go directly to the VC, which was an effective way of getting results, but respondents were conscious of the potential of this approach to irritate senior members of HEI staff. All acknowledged that resolving issues through the VC had to be used sparingly and only when all other routes had been exhausted. This contact with the VC's office was common across the sample.

When asked about the approach they take to get things done in their HEI EOs and CEOs across the sample said that informal, as opposed to formal, engagement through senior HEI staff was the most effective way of influencing decision-making and achieving objectives. In support of this point most EOs said how

important informal meetings with senior staff, usually over coffee or at HEI social events, were to building trust and effective working relationships. The respondents agreed that building high levels of trust and maintaining effective relationships with senior HEI managers were essential and allowed them to leverage influence over HEI decision-making to achieve their objectives. Members of the VC's senior executive group were a particular focus of attention because of their potential influence over resource allocation and policy. The strategic nature and importance of this approach is revealed by this response from a CEO about vacancies and staff changes happening at a senior level in the university:

"So, I think it's currently a red on our risk register cos we know we need allies….we need people who understand what we do…." (CEO SU post-92)

This finding suggests that in terms of achieving their objectives SUs have re-orientated their focus away from formal committees and towards senior institutional managers, suggesting a realisation of the shift in HEI management away from more democratic collegiate structures toward executive structures where senior institutional managers are authorised to make decisions and interpret institutional policy.

EOs who served on the HEI governing body explained how they worked to build good relations with governors, which they had found particularly useful in terms of getting support for issues raised at meetings. The following is typical of EO responses:

"I've worked hard to build good relations with external governors……you know, chat with them over coffee before meetings…that sort of thing. I've often used the opportunity to plant a seed before a meeting…. you know, by casually mentioning something of concern……which they've then brought up at the meeting in support of our view." (EO SU pre-92)

EOs talked about how their induction and training had helped them in preparing for what to expect and how to approach and work with senior HEI staff. It was clear from responses that EOs had had to adopt the business language normalised in HEI management in order to communicate effectively and represent the interests of their members. They said how they had learnt the value of using management terms that were in common use in the university.

Some EOs, because of their particular responsibilities, for example, the President, worked more closely with senior HEI managers and the representative committee structure. EOs whose responsibilities meant they were not closely involved in the same way said they felt that this restricted what they were able to contribute in SU management meetings. However, they added that every effort was made to include them and that they were well briefed.

All of the EOs involved in attending HEI committees said that they were enormously time consuming and that they felt they were of little real value and suggested that their HEI used their attendance primarily to record formally student endorsement of policy decisions that, in many cases, they felt had already been decided outside the meeting. One summed up the views of many:

"…. committees are deliberately created by the university as weapons of mass distraction, to keep the Students' Union busy and the sabs out of trouble." (EO SU pre-92)

Most the EOs who attended committees felt that time in meetings was largely unproductive and that they resented it because it was at the expense of time talking with student members.

When asked if the union's reliance on their HEI for funding and other resources affected the way they dealt with their HEI most of the EOs said it was probably more of a consideration for the CEO and ETs (a point confirmed by CEOs and ETs) but that this was not a consideration for them. To illustrate this point some EOs gave examples of issues over which they needed to get tough with their HEI. One example was an issue concerning difficulties some new students were having in finding housing, which related to the growth in student numbers, and the SU had challenged the institution suggesting that it take action and intervene to support students and address their problems. The matter escalated and the union published its concerns through the local press, which provoked a sharp response from the university. As the EO involved said;

'The VC didn't talk to us for two weeks, but they eventually came round and the university took action….and normal service was resumed." (EO SU pre-92)

Inadequate library and IT provision were other examples common across the sample, where SUs had challenged their HEI and had often used the threat of the

potential negative impact on student satisfaction or NSS results to encourage the institution to take action. These examples, and the one above, are issues that the EOs said they felt able to be robust on because they were confident they could generate strong support from student members. The finding also suggests the increasing value of student satisfaction surveys and NSS outcomes to HEIs.

A key finding was that all the SUs in the sample took a strategic and tactical approach to managing their relationship with their university, and that this was strongly influenced and devised by the CEO and other permanent staff. In practice EOs and the CEO communicated and connected with their institution at a range of levels, through senior and middle managers, and through attendance at groups and committees. Some CEOs and EOs commented on the importance of managers of professional services, for example, estates, and how they were increasingly using informal contacts with managers as a quicker route to get things done for students. In this respect the responsibility for maintaining effective working relationships was shared by EOs and the CEO.

5.4 Officers' Roles and Responsibilities

5.4.1 Elected officers

Nearly all the respondents had been connected with their SUs since entering HE and so their responses incorporated their perceptions about the way their union had changed over time. All, with the exception of one, had taken up office having completed their undergraduate studies. When asked about the purpose of their role all 18 EOs generally agreed that their job was to represent and protect the interests of student members, with most commenting on how this representative function had strengthened during their time at the university. Most respondents said that a recent change was the amount of time they spent getting out and talking to students, although many said that other pressures were making this more difficult.

'We are up and out there and we are not afraid to say something even if it's wrong, because the point of a union is to take stances on things reflective of our members' views.' (EO, pre-92)

All the respondents were conscious that they held multiple and often conflicting roles, with some commenting that they sometimes found it challenging to reconcile the demands of having to wear several hats: as a student representative, as a trustee, and as an employee of the union. The importance of their role as a trustee emerged strongly, particularly for those serving on the Trustee Board. In some SUs the President was also the chair of the Board of Trustees. Some EOs said that the

trustee responsibility had a 'chilling affect' when they were considering options and actions. There was also a strong sense from most of the EOs that they were being paid by the union to do a particular job as an employee of the SU. The representative and trustee roles emerged strongly from the responses as primary responsibilities.

A small number of EOs, predominantly those in SUs that had a history of being politically active nationally (SU5 and SU6) felt strongly that they had a wider political campaigning role as activists to fulfil and that this should be their priority. They talked about the importance of national campaigns led by the National Union of Students (NUS) and how they maintained close connections with NUS executive officers and attended conferences, and some sat on NUS committees.

"So, I've gone to nearly a dozen NUS conferences, including the last one, which was the big one, when Malia [new NUS national President] got elected, and I know a lot of the full-time officers quite well. So, I've got a personal relationship with some of them…so yes, they can have a direct impact on our campaigns." (EO SU pre-92)

This contrasted with the views of EOs from other SUs who said that NUS policies and actions were only considered if it was thought they would be relevant to, and supported by, their student membership. Local and more immediate student issues tended to dominate SU actions.

All the EOs said that they had general - to the SUs and students, and specific responsibilities – to a specific area of work, for example, sports. The latter reflected an increasing specialisation of roles, which was a trend across the sample, with EOs standing for office to do a particular job for the union. This was less true of EOs in SU5 and SU6 who spent more time campaigning and who were all involved in the development of union policy. Those EOs who had responsibilities for sports commented that the vast majority of their time was spent working with student groups and teams and that their contact with their host HEI tended to be to do with access to and the provision of specific resources. This was also true of other officers whose roles did not involve them in representation. In some unions this specialisation had a detrimental impact on the team dynamic.

"Don't know whether it's the layout of the building or something, we're quite siloed into different pockets because of our roles and don't often talk to each other…." (EO SU pre-92)

When asked how the reality of their job matched what they thought it was going to be nearly all the EOs said the job was much tougher. As one EO said;

"No. I don't think anyone could. I think they don't tell you because you wouldn't necessarily run if you knew (laughs)." (EO SU pre-92)

The high volume and complexity of the work surprised almost all the respondents, even those who had close friendships or associations with outgoing officers felt unprepared for the reality of the job. They were asked to talk through their typical day or week, and most said no day or week was the same. The following give a sense of this and are typical of the responses.

"What ends up happening every day is that I have an influx of about two hundred emails…. every day….and I'm constantly up against a barrage of admin that I don't want to be doing." (EO SU pr-92)

"I mean, I wasn't expecting such an email culture……I wasn't expecting to be bombarded with a hundred emails a day from students, from societies, and from staff…. wasn't really expecting that." (EO SU post-92)

"Although it's Monday to Friday nine to five it's more like Monday to Sunday twelve to twelve……it's all day every day, cos if you're part of the union you're part of that lifestyle." (EO SU post-92)

EOs from the politically active unions (SU5 and SU6) expressed frustration that the volume work that they had to complete prevented them from achieving their wider campaigning ambitions. For these EOs this represented a distraction from what they felt they should and wanted to be doing.

"Yeh, expectations from the university and expectations from students, and expectations from union staff as well. So basically, we're being pulled from so many different angles that we don't really get the time to do the things that we like doing, to be honest, or when we do get to do them it's very limited". (EO SU pre-92)

They were also surprised at the breadth of their responsibilities and the degree to which they were held personally to account by student members – who some said were more demanding and "unreasonable" than they had expected, the union's trustee board, and the university. This accountability was manifest in formal reporting procedures. Nearly all the EOs were required to report on their progress in achieving their manifesto promises, which for most meant providing updates on the SU website and reporting regularly to the student council or equivalent group charged with monitoring EO performance. There was also an informal element of accountability exercised by students through social media. All of the EOs were conscious of the increasing use of social media by students as a means of communicating and commenting on their actions and behaviours and the operation of SU more generally. Some EOs said that they had experienced what they felt amounted to personal attacks through social media for views they had expressed or for supporting particular campaigns. The use of social media by members as a means of holding EOs to account emerged as a key finding.

Most EOs talked about the expectation that they should work and behave in a 'professional manner', which was reinforced through their induction and training. They offered examples such as preparing appropriately for meetings, turning up on time, responding to emails and managing their inbox, and, in most cases, dressing appropriately, for example, those attending governing body meetings. Some EOs, particularly in politically active unions said that they resented the fact that they should dress differently for particular events or meetings. As one EO said:

"It's my job to represent students and I would normally dress like a student – that's who I am, and that's important cos I want students to relate to me and see me as their representative…. not working for the university." (EO SU post-92)

In response to a question about the skills required to do the job most respondents talked about critical thinking, active listening, the ability to collect evidence and do basic research, understanding finance, being politically savvy, being able to negotiate and compromise, and being able to communicate with a wide range of people. Most of the EOs referred to the fact that this was their first 'real' full-time job with some commenting that the need to keep office hours, for example, was a new discipline that they had had to adjust to quickly, and for some this represented a very steep learning curve. At the start of their period in office they said that they were heavily dependent on the CEO and other members of the union's full-time staff. Most said that they found the CEO to be helpful and supportive, and said the same about other permanent union staff. This finding highlights how the importance of the CEO and permanent staff had grown as the volume and complexity of union work had increased.

When asked why they had decided to stand the majority of EOs said that they had either worked in societies or clubs, or on projects connected to or part of the union and had enjoyed the experience, and they thought they could make a difference. Some had been persuaded by friends to stand. Some, for example, those who had been involved with the union as course representatives described themselves as 'career sabs'. Most also said that they thought it would be useful experience to include on their CV and give them an advantage over other graduates in the jobs market.

Asked about the support and help they received in preparation for taking on the role and during their time as officers, most said they had talked and worked with outgoing EOs in the same role, which some found useful and others less useful. All agreed that this did not prepare them for their role. Some suggested that outgoing officers had deliberately underplayed the volume of work and responsibilities involved for fear of scaring new officers away. All 18 of the respondents commented on the training and induction programme run by the SUs over the summer period as a key introduction to their role and responsibilities and said that there were further training opportunities during the year.

All of the SUs in the sample had an established formal induction and training programme for incoming EOs, and from the comments made this appeared to be general practice across the sector. The programme included a period of overlap, usually two weeks to a month, between the incoming and outgoing EOs. Typically, the programme would include: EO responsibilities as charity trustees and as student representatives, financial and budgetary responsibilities, how to work with senior staff in the university, and committee attendance and reporting back. There were mixed responses to how useful the programme had been, with most EOs saying that the programme content had been of limited value, mainly because its abstract nature did not prepare them for the real thing and there was too much to absorb in a relatively short period of time. For most the start of their first term was a baptism of fire, as one EO said *"after a relatively relaxed summer period, preparing and talking and scenario planning, ….you know…..the start of term hits you like a train and you don't come up for air until Christmas."(EO SU pre-92) Another said "It was quite quiet when we started in July, cos there were no students……but in September it just hit me quite hard…..I was shocked, taken aback."(EO SU post-92)* Most mentioned that they had found learning on the job a more effective way of getting to grips with their role and responsibilities.

Mentoring schemes were also in place to support EOs through the year, typically EOs were paired with the CEO or another senior member of the SU's full time staff. EOs commented that some EOs had used this opportunity more than others to support them in their role. EOs also used External Trustees as mentors, but this was a less formal arrangement. This was supplemented by training during the year, and it was not unusual for unions to buy in professional training, for example, from law firms to deliver training on the responsibilities of being a trustee. This, along with the structured induction and training programme was a key finding and illustrates how much effort and resources SUs were investing to ensure that EOs understood their roles and responsibilities and had the skills to enable them to carry them out. Also, how the timing and structure of the programme ensured that all EOs receive the same training.

There was also mention of the training and support offered by the NUS for new EOs during the summer. Almost all the EOs had attended and found this useful in terms of helping them understand their role and as an important opportunity to meet EOs from other SUs. This facilitated them in building networks which they maintained and used regularly throughout their time as officers. This was simpler for some EOs, for example, Presidents found it easier because their role was common across the sector. For those with more specialist roles it could be more difficult to find their equivalent in another SU. Those in politically active unions said that they had built networks with EOs who held similar political views, usually in SUs that had a tradition of being politically active nationally. All the CEOs were supportive of the training offered by NUS and the opportunities this offered for EOs.

When asked where they go for 'on the job' advice all the EOs said that their first point of contact would be the CEO or other SU managers, particularly during the early part of their time in office. The responses from EOs in SU5 and SU6 suggested that they used the NUS more as a reference and source of advice. It was clear from EO responses that the unions in the sample were structured around key specialist functions (relating to EO roles) led in many cases by a senior permanent member of staff and other support staff. EOs worked very closely as part of these teams on a day-to-day basis. Some also said that they had a good relationship with the ETs, and often used them as a source of advice and guidance. This finding emphasised the growing importance of the CEO role and other permanent staff in the union, and ETs.

There was a wide range of responses to a question about other sources of advice, support and information, with most citing networks**,** both formal and informal, as providing important touch points. These included NUS networks, and friends and

family. Some EOs said that they had deliberately established contacts with officers in what they referred to as "similar institutions", often mirroring partnerships that their HEI had established regionally, because they felt these SUs were dealing with similar issues. The respondents also said that they accessed a range of online information and research on higher education, including publications from other unions. These had become an important and effective way of collecting information and research as evidence in support of ideas and proposals that they had put to their SU management group, and also allowed them to contrast and compare with what was going on in their own union.

When asked about the role of the CEO most EOs said they were responsible for the operation and management of the SU and for delivering the union's strategy. As one respondent put it *"....to make sure the company…the charity, is legally safe, financially safe,.... the wellbeing of its staff, and the wellbeing of the officers." (EO SU pre-92)*. Most of the respondents drew a distinction between the CEO's responsibility for general management, operations, and delivering the strategy and campaigns and projects, which they saw as the responsibility of officers.

When asked about what they wanted to achieve nearly all the respondents talked about leaving a 'legacy', something they and others could look back on and attribute to their time in office. This motivation was strong and meant that EOs were very focussed on the short-term and getting things done quickly. They were very aware that the planning and financial cycles of the union and their HEI and the timescales involved in getting things approved often worked against them. This finding reveals the very limited time EOs had to deliver on their manifesto promises, introduce new ideas and initiate change, and goes some way to explain their frustrations and impatience with decision-making processes. As one EO said, *"we've basically got nine months to make a difference……. new officers are already being voted in before you blink." (EO SU pre-92)*

All the respondents said that the experience they had gained as officers had been valuable and that they felt it had strengthened their CV and employment prospects by giving them a range of transferrable skills. When asked about their career options all the EOs, with the exception of three who had studied vocational courses, saw their opportunities in the charity or third or related sectors and said they were using the opportunities offered by the union to develop skills that would directly support this progression. They were conscious of the impact of anything that might have a damaging effect on their reputation. This was not as true of EOs in SU5 and SU6 who were less concerned about how their actions might impact on their CV and future career aspirations and more concerned about making a difference.

It was notable how in their responses to questions all the EOs used and were familiar with what might be regarded as business or corporate language. Phrases such as measuring performance and target setting, audit and risk management, collective responsibility, managing risk, students as customers, evidence-based decisions, the SU as a business, financial risk and financial sustainability, and being accountable were common, which suggested that this language had been normalised and probably reinforced through induction and training and in the day-to-day dealings with union staff and staff in their HEI. A similar language was used by CEOs, confirming this point.

There were notable differences in responses across the sample between EOs in SUs that had a history and tradition of being politically active (and one or two EOs in other SUs who were more politically conscious and as a consequence found it difficult to relate to the wider EO team) and those in unions that had little or no tradition. This finding suggests that there is still a strong motivation in some SUs to get involved in wider national political policy debates and campaigns.

5.4.2 Chief Executive Officers

The CEOs in the sample came from a range of professional backgrounds, with most having been involved with SUs as EOs and/or through working in the NUS. Responses to questions about the purpose of the SU were broadly similar and focussed on the representative function. This response encompasses the views of the group: *"…. the main purpose here is to represent the views of students to the university." (CEO SU post-92).* The point was presented more forcefully *"…if you can't justify why you're at the table you won't be at the table. And, so…Students' Unions really do have to do primary purpose representation." (CEO SU pre-92).* A minority of respondents talked about a wider purpose for the SU, one that provided space for students to realise their ambitions and interests outside of their educational experience.

There was a consistent response from CEOs when asked about their role with the majority saying that their primary role was to support the EOs in fulfilling their responsibilities as elected student representatives and their role as trustees. *"….so, my role is still supporting the full-time officers…. that's a large part of my role." (CEO SU pre-92)*

"So, my role is I suppose twofold….one is to support the officers to make sure that they are effective advocates for the students and to make sure that they are given

the tools and the support and the guidance…. and mentoring them based on my experience." (CEO SU post-92)

Most CEOs said that their role had grown and developed.

"One of the things I've noticed since I've been working in Students' Unions [for 12 years] is that they are very different to when I started…. And, they have changed, and their focus has changed significantly."

All the respondents emphasised the student-led democratic nature of the union and the authority vested in the EOs by the student membership.

When asked about the role of EOs all of the respondents were clear that the primary role of EOs was to represent the views and interests of students and that this was best achieved by spending time going out and talking to students, to find out what they wanted and to let them know what the SU was doing and was able to do on their behalf. For most respondents this meant working in a professional manner. As one CEO put it:

"the days when they [EOs] would go out and get drunk and not turn up for work the next day cos they were hung-over or turn up and sleep under the desk all day, are well and truly over." (CEO, SU post 92)

When asked about the particular responsibilities of EOs there was agreement that it depended on the nature of their position. Those involved in sports, community or volunteering activities were more likely to be involved, most of the time, with student groups than those working in representation. This was consistent with responses from EOs about specialisation. The following statements are broadly representative of the CEO group:

"Partly depends on the role…. if you're the sports sab the reality is you're probably not doing as much representation as the academic sab….so it flexes and mixes." (CEO SU pre-92)

"Well, I see they're representatives……you know they've all got their different roles…. they're here to find out the issues of students, find out what the students

want, what the student voice is saying to them and then to use their representative status to represent them locally and nationally." "They're the link between the students and the university." (CEO SU post-92)

"The primary function should be to be student representatives." ".... you want them to commit twenty-five hours a week just going out and being representatives of students and finding out what students are thinking and doing. Going and explaining what the students' union does and what they want the students' union to do for them."

There was general acknowledgement that EOs had a difficult job to do, that the job was multi-faceted and that EOs had to manage a number of different and challenging roles. Being an effective student representative and trustee was challenging and would often present them with difficult choices. There was a strong emphasis placed on the importance of the trustee role by most respondents. All the respondents commented on how inexperienced the EOs were when they started their term of office, and how totally unprepared they were, including those who had had previous roles and connections with the union. All commented on the amount of support and guidance EOs needed, particularly at the start of their term of office. Most commented on the complexity and breadth of the jobs EOs were asked to do.

"They've got an almost impossible job. The only reason it's doable is because they don't know how big it is generally at that stage of their work experience…. if I'm honest."

Commenting on their own role they went on to say that a big part of their job was to manage the full-time staff and the general management of the union's services and its finances, and the delivery of the strategic plan. The strategic plan, or equivalent, was a relatively new development in SUs. It typically presented a union's ambitions and objectives for the three years ahead and was an important framework for EO ambitions. There was a strong sense from respondents that having a strategic plan was an important demonstration to stakeholders that the SU was a serious organisation and operated on professional lines.

All the respondents agreed that the job had changed and that there was a greater emphasis on impact and measuring performance, and providing evidence/data to support proposals it was putting forward to the institution and more generally to reinforce and substantiate its claims to external audiences about the value provided

by the SU. The need to confirm the value and the credibility of the SU was a recurring theme.

The respondents commented on the importance of the Trustee Board and how it had added to the volume and complexity of what SUs are required to do. The vast majority of SUs nationally are now registered charities in their own right, which represents a change from the previous arrangement where they had charitable status as part of their university, and required the adoption of charitable objects and the more formal constitution of Trustee Boards. Respondents commented positively on the appointment of independent External Trustees (ETs), saying that their professional experience and expertise was adding value to the business of the Trustee Board and the union and was an indication of how boards had been professionalised. The addition of ETs to SU Trustee Boards is now common practice across the HE sector. It was clear from CEO responses that ETs were regularly used as a source of advice and guidance outside of board meetings. Some added that ETs strengthened the credibility of the union with their HEI and other stakeholders.

All of the CEOs talked about being personally accountable and having to report to the Trustee Board**,** and that this was an additional responsibility. The impact the appointment of ETs had had on accountability was of particular note. Most respondents said that their preparations and the paperwork for board meetings had changed and that more time was spent on anticipating and preparing for likely questions from ETs. The following responses are representative of CEOs:

"The Charity Commission is an additional one [responsibility]……. we've professionalised the Trustee Board by having some external independent professional trustees on the board, that came about when we registered in 2010 as a charity in our own right." (CEO SU Pre-92)

"I think the Chief Executive of Students' Unions has changed quite dramatically since we became charities [in our own right] and they've had this extra layer of governance…. not like before when there were no external trustees to challenge you." (CEO SU post-92)

In this respect most CEOs talked about their role in ensuring that the union was compliant with its constitutional and its legal obligations. The significance of charity registration and the need to comply with charity law was highlighted as a relatively new responsibility for SUs. The legal requirements associated with being

a charity were referred to consistently by all the respondents, including the EOs, in response to questions about to the scope of SU actions. The importance and influence of the trustee board was a recurring theme across the findings.

All of the CEOs in the sample identified, some strongly, with being part of the charities sector and actively used the sector as a source of professional advice and good practice. Some CEOs were keen to point out that the role of the CEO in a SU was similar to the CEO in any charity, with the student-led element highlighted as an important distinction. The following illustrates this point:

"So, in some ways it's completely the same as being the chief exec of any other charity. It's about keeping your eye on the present and the future to ensure that strategically we make the right decisions to be here delivering impact for our members for generations to come. So, that bit - the people, the money, the planning is exactly the same. It's the living and breathing the student-led bit…. how you do it, and what's involved that I think is different." (CEO SU pre-92)

The following response is representative of CEOs' comments on the way the role had changed and the emphasis on accountability:

'The role is fundamentally the same it's just that now we're accountable to more people…. we're accountable to the Charity Commission, the University, the student body, the Board of Trustees…. you know you've got four lines of responsibility. The Charity Commission is an additional one…. we've professionalised the Trustee Board by having some external independent professional trustees on the board…'. (CEO, pre-92)

The purpose of SUs was explored with ETs and the following response is representative of views expressed. *"To look after the interests of its members through representation…. not what elected officers might think is right or want to do…." (ET SU post 92 HEI).*

All of the ETs commented on how critical it was for the SU to comply with charity law and that this was basically their reason for being on the Trustee Board, to provide expertise and oversight, and advice on the likely impact of proposed courses of action. Some said that they had a close working relationship with the CEO and President and mentored EOs.

When asked about the role of the CEO all agreed that managing the SU and its staff and ensuring that the union remained financially sustainable were central to the role. As one ET put it, *"They are the voice of reason."*

In response to questions about the qualifications and skills needed to do the job effectively most CEOs commented that postgraduate qualifications and senior management experience were essential and now common. Most emphasised that they were professional managers, and that CEOs were working nationally to gain professional recognition and take advantage of the potential benefits of being associated with third sector management. Some commented on the need to recognise SU management as a profession in a similar way to student union management in the USA, and to encourage graduates to see SU management as a professional career option. This was a strong motivator and reflected the personal ambitions of CEOs. This related to the general agreement amongst CEOs that their unions had changed and had professionalised, and that this was best illustrated by changes to governance and management arrangements, their structures and operating practices, and the behaviours of EOs and the CEO and permanent staff.

The respondents also talked about the need to professionalise the union to meet the expectations of the student membership and the university, and other external stakeholders, to operate the organisation efficiently and effectively, and to strengthen the credibility of the SU in terms of its ability to effectively manage its resources and staff and meet its responsibilities. There was a consensus that the SU was working all the time to present a professional face through the behaviour of its officers and across the full range of its functions and activities. Being seen to be serious and business like in the way it operated and decided on actions was a central consideration.

The respondents all said that getting the EOs 'up to speed quickly' was a key aspect of their role. They talked about the increasing importance of the induction, training and mentoring programme and how this had been introduced and developed over recent years as a necessary and essential part of getting EOs into their roles quickly. The programme had replaced what had previously been an informal handover between incoming and outgoing EOs. When asked about how the programme was devised and delivered the majority of CEOs said that the programme built on the previous year's experience and was devised by outgoing EOs working closely with a senior member of full-time union staff, and in some cases the CEO. In the majority of unions the programme was predominantly delivered by union staff.

"There's an initial two-week handover period between the current officers and the new officers, which is supported by the staff team, so we come in and we go through the sort of important stuff…. who the movers and shakers are in the institution and what are the key issues, what does our strategy look like, and some key considerations which will hit them immediately. So, they have a pretty comprehensive programme…. I reckon that takes about three months to deliver." (CEO SU pre-92)

Mentoring was highlighted as an important continuing support for EOs and respondents commented on how they and senior union staff mentored EOs through the year. From the responses it was suggested induction, training and mentoring programmes for EOs were common practice across the HE sector, and that there was active sharing of good practice in this area amongst SUs.

When asked about where they go for advice and guidance all the CEOs said that they had established networks both within HE, primarily with other CEOs, and outside HE, for example, with CEOs of charities. There was an established national network of CEOs that met regularly. In addition, some CEOs had established smaller network groups with CEOs from SUs in HEIs that had partnerships with their host university, which they felt had similar issues and interests. Some said that they were part of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), which provides advice and support to the voluntary sector, which reinforced the connections CEOs felt with this sector. CEOs said that they regularly used ETs as a source of advice and guidance and as a sounding board for new ideas and for proposed solutions to issues or problems.

Responses from CEOs and ETs about union priorities contrasted with the short-term priorities of EOs confirming their focus on the medium to longer-term sustainability and credibility of the SU. The focus on different planning and operational horizons by EOs and CEOs (and ETs) was a major finding. Responses also confirmed their concerns relating to constitutional and legal compliance, and the impact of SU actions and positions on important and strategic relations, particularly the union's relationship with their university. Responses from ETs suggested that their primary concerns were around financial sustainability and legal compliance and maintaining the reputation of the SU and its relationships with its stakeholders.

5.5 Decision-Making and Working Relationships

From the responses there was a general consensus across the sample about the purpose of the SU, which was primarily to represent and protect the interests of student members. Although EOs from more politically active SUs expressed a slightly different view illustrated by the following:

"See, I think students' unions used to be a massive force for good in the world, and I think we're slowly losing that, and I think that's what I'd like a students' union to be." (EO SU pre-92)

When asked about how they worked together as a group most EOs said that they did not feel the need to meet on a regular basis although they said that this had been their intention at the start of their year. A minority of EO teams had regular scheduled meetings, for example, every Monday mornings but said that other commitments meant that it was rare for the whole team to be in attendance. These meetings tended to be about sharing information and progress on projects and campaigns EOs were leading on. Responses indicated that most EO teams preferred and were more comfortable using social media to keep in touch and to keep other EOs informed about what they were doing, and as a means of communication between group members.

In those SUs that had a President role (the majority in the sample) the office holders were conscious of their leadership role in relation to the other officers and how they were perceived by stakeholders, particularly the university. Presidents commented on how their HEI wanted them to attend all meetings and events in preference to other EOs, which put considerable pressure on the role holder. In this sense the President was seen by the HEI as the primary and first point of contact in the union. This created a sense of hierarchy in EO teams reinforced by the strong working relationship between the CEO and the President. In one case the President said that his role and the role of the CEO were interchangeable.

Most EOs socialised together and they said that their friendships had strengthened during their time in office. There were exceptions in most of the SUs related to EOs, usually one or two, who for a range of reasons, one saying "that they didn't want to spend time socially with people they had been working with all day" or with whom "they didn't share the same political views", did not integrate socially with the wider group. One interesting finding was that EOs who were serving for a second one-year term did not tend to integrate socially with new EOs and expressed frustration and the need for patience with "new team members". This finding

suggested that EO teams might have a mix of continuing and new officers, which seemed to have implications for the effectiveness of the team. Socialising had an important impact on loyalty in EO teams.

All the CEOs had regular one-on-one meetings with EOs, and met more regularly with the President, most had developed a close working relationship. CEOs said that they did not mix socially on a regular basis with EOs. When asked about the nature of the relationship between the CEO and EOs most CEOs said that there was a strong comparison with the relationship between a senior civil servant and a minister. EOs said that the physical location of the CEO had an impact on working relationships, although it was noted that the President being located close to the CEO was becoming less typical as EO teams were moved to more 'front of house' locations.

All of the unions in the sample had formal structures for making and recording decisions, these consisted of a management group or equivalent constituted of the EOs and the CEO, and sometimes including other senior full-time staff. This group was the decision-making body for the SU. There was mixed practice across the sample in respect of chairing meetings, in some SUs it was chaired by the CEO, in others the President or a designated EO or on a rotational basis. When asked about how agendas were created and decisions made CEOs and EOs said that adding items to the agenda for meetings was open to all and that decisions were arrived at by consensus with inputs from EOs, the CEO and AOs, and that it was very rare for a vote on a proposal to be necessary. When asked if they were able to influence decisions and push through their own ideas EOs said that they were able to put forward proposals and were aware that there might be constraints – time, resources, and competing priorities, but that in general they felt that there were genuine opportunities to get things approved. A broad distinction was made suggesting that it was the EOs who put forward proposals and the CEO and senior staff who commented on implementation and any implications.

Some EOs said that the specialised nature of their role, for example, sports or community, meant that they were not as close to general policy making and working with the institution as other EOs whose representative role meant that this was a central part of their responsibility. However, they said they were well briefed on the arguments for proposals and that they trusted those EOs who were closer to policy formulation. Responses from EOs in politically active unions (SU5 and SU6) suggested that they were, out of interest, all closer to policymaking.

All the SUs had a structured approach to the consideration of proposals and required a formal presentation on the decision sought, including the resource implications and the supporting research or evidence. EOs across the sample said that they were challenged and tested on their suggestions and had to provide a well-argued case and in particular evidence of support from the student membership. They were encouraged to conduct their own research. This evidence-based approach was a theme that ran through both internal campaigns – producing evidence that there was sufficient support for a campaign in the membership, and external campaigns – where proposals involved presenting to the university. Respondents said that once decisions were made or a policy approved there was general acceptance of collective responsibility.

From the responses financial and budget planning seemed to present particular challenges because of having to work within the HEI's budget cycle. For most SUs this meant that outgoing EOs and not incoming EOs were involved in the approval of the union's budget for the following year. There were proactive attempts to include incoming EOs' manifesto promises as part of budgetary considerations, and most respondents said that this worked. Decisions on budgets tended to be reached based on a consensus without recourse to voting and were made by a group consisting of EOs and the CEO with delegated authority to complete this task. The agenda was normally set and issued by the CEO with priorities largely determined with reference to the union's strategic plan or equivalent, or issues that had emerged during the session, for example, support for student housing. The findings suggest that budgets were tightly managed and significant officer time was required for this annual approval process. It also revealed the importance placed on medium to longer-term financial planning and sustainability as a union and officer priority. EOs commented that major priorities during the year, for example, re-writing the strategic plan, consumed a great deal of their time. EOs in politically active SUs (SU5 and SU6) resented the fact that this took them away from their campaigning interests.

EOs expressed frustration and in some cases exasperation at the length of time it took to get things done, particularly when dealing with their HEI. The finding confirmed the pressures on officer time and how much time was involved in achieving change, which was normally longer than an EO's term of office. This impacted on the priorities of EOs, which tended to focus more on the short-term and getting things done quickly. This contrasted with the priorities of CEOs who said that their focus was on more immediate issues but that they were also very conscious of the medium to longer-term, and in particular the impact of short-term union activities on the relationship with their HEI. Some respondents commented that they understood the urgency for action presented by EOs and their ambitions, and that sometimes this led to tensions because of the wider implications.

When asked about the value and influence of the NUS EOs expressed different and sometimes opposing views about the purpose and value of the NUS, its officers and campaigns. It was evident from responses that EOs in politically active unions were closer to NUS executive members and policy and campaigns, which they generally supported and promoted. EOs in other unions said that their support for NUS policy and campaigns was steered by what they considered to be relevant to the needs of their student membership; in this respect they said they were selective. This finding demonstrated the mixed responses to calls to get involved in national campaigning, and the strength of local issues in determining SU priorities.

5.6 Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings suggest that all the SUs in the sample had adopted a strategic and proactive approach to their engagement with their student members and their host HEI. This reflected a shift in the way EOs and CEOs perceived and operationalised their roles and responsibilities. All the SUs in the study had experienced organisational change in terms of management and governance arrangements. The findings suggest that these changes have led to a re-orientation of the roles and responsibilities of EOs and CEOs in order to address an increase in the volume and complexity of their work. There had been notable additions to the number of permanent union staff employed to manage and administer this increase and a significant shift in SU functions towards representation and membership services. This had happened within the context of greater accountability, which manifested in formal systems and processes that held EOs and CEOs personally to account for their performance and the actions of the SU. The power of social media and the influence of External Trustees emerged as key findings in this respect. The findings suggest that SUs had professionalised their management and governance operations, which is evident in their structured and deliberate approaches to engaging with students and managing relationships with their university. This professionalisation placed a premium on professional experience and expertise, which resulted in EOs being heavily reliant on professional support from the CEO and other permanent staff in order to carry out their roles and responsibilities. This *'experience and expertise gap'* between the CEO and EOs is a key finding, it creates an asymmetry of power and influence and has the potential to impact decision-making and the purpose of the SU. The findings suggest however that this gap may be mitigated by the induction and training that EOs received – from the SU and the NUS, and the support and advice that they obtain from proactively building and engaging with both formal and informal networks. The introduction of *'evidence-based decision-making'*, which provided a structured approach and open and transparent discussion of proposals, is another factor that may also have acted as a check on this power and influence asymmetry. This balance of power

and influence and the primacy of the EOs is important for the democratic nature of SUs.

The chapter that follows considers the implications of these findings when located within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in the Literature review chapter.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1. Introduction

6.1.1 The Context

The higher education (HE) sector in the UK has over several decades been subject to major reform characterised by massive growth and marketisation. Successive governments have progressively replaced public funding for HE with private funding from tuition fees paid by students with the support of government backed income contingent loans. The significant increase in tuition fees in 2012 to cover the full cost of teaching for many marked the final stage in the marketisation of HE (Brown, 2013) a process that purports to locate students at the heart of the HE system (DBIS, 2011). The financial empowerment of students as consumers of HE (DBIS, 2011) is central to a client-based approach to bringing about change in HEIs (Deem, R., 2008). Students are encouraged by government to see HE as a commodity and an investment that will enable them to secure a good job after graduation (Naidoo and Williams, 2014). In response to increased competition for students and resources HEIs have become more corporate managed institutions (Rochford, 2014) characterised by management practices and technologies imported from the private sector (Shepherd, 2017). Student perceptions about their HE experience and the way HEIs operate have transformed the characteristics of Students' Union (SUs) membership and the institutional context within which SUs are embedded.

6.1.2 Research Questions

This discussion sets out the implications of the results of the enquiry into how changes in membership and the institutional context in which they are embedded impact on the organisation and effectiveness of SUs. From this broad line of enquiry and the review of literature the following research questions were generated:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

6.1.3 Contribution to the Literature

The literature on SUs is relatively small, albeit growing, and lacks a conceptual framework. Empirical studies (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015, Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, 2015b) suggest universal trends in the way contemporary SUs have changed suggesting a shift in the emphasis of their functions towards their role as the body representing student interests. This shift is explained as a response to increasing student consumer orientations, which it is argued intensified following the increase in tuition fees in 2012 (Tomlinson, 2017). The literature has a tendency to present SUs as coherent whole organisations without revealing organisational features or the internal dynamics between SU officers, with one exception. Brooks et al. (2015a) suggest that SU permanent staff are assuming power at the expense of elected officers (EOs). By extension this suggests that the roles of officers may be changing and that this may be a consequence of other operational changes in SUs. There is very little research on how change in SU membership and the institutional context in which they are embedded is impacting on how SU officers perceive and operationalise their roles and responsibilities, how this impacts the dynamic between EOs and the CEO and SU decision-making, and the way SUs engage with their members and their host HEI. This study contributes to the literature by addressing this gap in current research.

6.1.4 The Sample

Table 2 Students' Unions Selection Criteria

Students' Union	Pre 92	Post 92	Size	Politically active
SU 1	X		M	
SU 2		X	S	
SU 3	X		M	
SU 4		X	L	
SU 5	X		L	X
SU 6	X		M	X

This chapter discusses the implications of the findings of this study and draws on relevant features of the conceptual framework for intermediary organisations in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999). The data was generated from interviews with SU officers and reflects their perceptions and interpretations of change in SUs. The discussion focuses in particular on the impact changes in SU membership and HEIs are having on the organisational features of SUs. The discussion identifies these features as: the roles and responsibilities of SU officers, the role and purpose of

SUs, the way SUs engage with students and their host HEI, and management and decision-making. The discussion addresses each of the research questions and ends with the main conclusions drawn from the discussion.

6.2. Students' Unions: Role and Purpose

6.2.1 Charity Registration

The analysis of data suggests that the 2006 Charities Act had a major impact on SUs. The impact of charity registration on SUs is under-researched. Changes to charity law presented SUs with two choices, to relinquish charitable status and the associated benefits or to register as charities in their own right under new arrangements. The data revealed that all of the SUs in the study had registered as charities in their own right, they all had charitable status under previous arrangements through their host HEI. Under new arrangements SUs are directly accountable to the Charity Commission. Charity registration confers certain benefits, financial and others that are granted subject to the organisation's pursuit of charitable objects. The interview data revealed that charity registration required changes to SU governance and management arrangements that included constitutional amendments. All of the SUs in the study had established a Board of Trustees, which including External Trustees (ETs) usually with experience of the professions or business. Data from interviews with ETs suggested that their primary focus was on ensuring that the SU operated consistent with charity law and was not contemplating actions that would threaten charitable status. Interview responses from some EOs suggested that ETs, and the Trustee Board, had considerable influence over the management of SUs and decision-making. The literature refers to how legal and financial responsibilities can constrain SU decision-making choices (Rodgers et al., 2011) and charity registration would fall into this category. Registering as charities in their own right did not change the role and purpose of SUs however new arrangements involve considerable additional responsibilities. The new charity law is perhaps an example of how external regulation can impact on the operational features of SUs and constrain a union's ability to take independent action.

6.2.2 Independence

SUs are independent organisations with their own constitution. The data revealed that all the SUs in the study regarded their independence as being critical to fulfilling their representative function and providing credibility with their members. Klemenčič (2012a) suggests that SU independence is largely determined by their legal status and how they are resourced. SUs in the UK have legal status through statute (DES, 1994) however the vast majority are dependent on their host HEI for most or all of the resources they need to operate, and this was true of all the SUs in the sample. The literature also suggests that income from commercial activities

strengthens SU independence (Klemenčič, 2014, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). The data revealed that all the SUs in the sample generated some income from commercial activities, for example, shops, bars, and entertainment venues, which supplemented funds received from their host HEI. Most commented that income from this source had declined in recent years primarily because of competition from the high street. This finding supports Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) who noted a significant decline in commercial income since the millennium. The interview results suggest that CEOs were particularly conscious of the potential impact of this loss of income on their SU's independence. The data suggest that commercial activities were also regarded by all the SUs in the sample as an important opportunity to build student loyalty through student engagement with SU run facilities and activities. This supports suggestions that the impact of students choosing the high street above their SU means that SUs can no longer rely on student loyalty built through experiencing the union as a venue to meet and build friendships and socialise as much as they had in the past (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015).

The literature suggests that resource dependency leaves SUs vulnerable to steering or in extremis intervention from their host HEI (Klemenčič, 2014, Rochford, 2014). By extension SUs that are totally dependent on their host HEI have little choice but to align their agenda with that of their host HEI (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). The results did not suggest that SUs felt particularly constrained in their actions by being resource dependent on the host HEI or that they had refrained from actions that challenged or questioned their institution. The selected SUs offered a number of examples when they had felt it necessary, because student grievances were not being addressed, to escalate an issue to a point, in one case, where it was covered in the local media, and this had embarrassed the institution. In general the data suggested that EOs were less concerned about the impact of their actions on the future funding of their SU than CEOs. This can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that EOs were motivated by the need to get things done during their term of office, as many EOs put it to leave a 'legacy', and as a result their focus was on the short term and delivering on their manifesto promises. Whilst there was no sense that EOs were indifferent to the medium to longer-term financial sustainability of their SU their focus was very much on more immediate projects and campaigns. This contrasted with how CEOs viewed SU priorities and actions which indicated that whilst they appeared not to be overly concerned about the impact of short-term actions on future resourcing they were primarily concerned to ensure that the SU remained financially sustainable over the medium to longer term. It can also be posited that the fact that CEOs were invested in their union in terms of their career and job security was likely to give them a focus on the medium to longer term. These different perspectives of EOs and CEOs were universal across the sample SUs. The findings suggest that all the SUs in the sample believed strongly that the best way to protect their independence was to secure and maintain high levels of

student support and loyalty. The interview results suggested that SUs believed that this mitigated, to some degree, their resource dependency. The interview data revealed that continued student support and loyalty was primarily dependent on the effective representation and protection of student interests.

6.2.3 Representation

Historically SUs have fulfilled a number of roles and functions including representation, advice services, student volunteering, sports clubs, societies, shops and bars, and entertainment (Rodgers, et al. 2011). The data strongly supports a number of empirical studies that suggest that SUs have increased their emphasis on their representation function (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). This emphasis on representation forefronts the primary role of SUs as intermediary organisations between students and their HEI. The interview data suggested that the shift towards representation was in large part a response to more assertive consumer-oriented students seeking value for money from their HE experience. It was also noted that students were increasingly interested in what their tuition fees were being spent on. CEOs commented that student consumer orientations had intensified following the increase in tuition fees in 2012. This is consistent with Tomlinson (2017) and Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a). This shift to consumer behaviours fits with the assumption that students in a market for HE will behave as rational actors seeking value for money and utility from their purchase (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). By the end of the 2014/15 academic year students enrolled on three-year undergraduate courses were the first cohort to have paid full fees (£9,000 p.a.) for the duration of the course. This change in student behaviours and expectations marks a shift in the characteristics of SU membership towards a focus on the student experience.

Tomlinson (2017) suggests that following the increase in tuition fees the student experience came to encompass the totality of a student's engagement with their HEI not just their academic experience. The analysis of data supported this view and found that SUs were being drawn into resolving issues outside of academic matters, for example, poor heating in lecture theatres. The acceptance of a broader notion of the student experience extends previous understandings of student interests, which were confined to educational representation (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). The market model suggests that students are the best judges of what is in their interests (Williams, 2004). The data also revealed that student interests varied and were influenced by a number of factors including socio-economic background (Rodgers et al., 2011). These factors shaped the range of student preferences and needs faced by SUs and how unions organised and prioritised their resources, including how EOs perceived and operationalised their role and responsibilities. For example, the data revealed that SUs in post 92 universities tended to direct

more resources in support of welfare and financial advice services. This supports Rodgers et al. (2011) who suggest that post 92 institutions because they recruit students from less privileged backgrounds spend more on student support. It follows that student interests are determined by how the student experience is conceptualised. The logic of membership (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999) suggests that as a characteristic of membership student consumer orientations are likely to influence the organisational features of SUs.

The interview data suggested that the SUs in the sample had changed the way they promoted themselves to their members. Nearly all the unions in the sample emphasised that they were student-led organisations and this had shaped their approach to how their representation function operated. This student-led approach was part of the strategy to improve student engagement and build student support and loyalty. In this model of representation student interests, that is, issues relating to their individual experience, drove SU priorities and actions. In practice this tended to focus SU agendas and resources on local or domestic issues. This contrasted with the notion of the SU taking the lead in determining what was in the interests of students. This localisation of student issues was a common trend across the sample of SUs and supports the findings of other studies (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b). Nearly all of the respondents commented on how local or domestic issues had come to dominate union agendas, officer time and union resources. The student-led approach and the localisation of student issues in many ways reflects a more direct democratic model of representation with EOs acting more as delegates than representatives.

The analysis of data also suggested that the size and diversity of SU membership added both volume and complexity to collating and prioritising student preferences. Most SUs are medium to large-scale organisations with over 15,000 members, as the SUs in the study illustrate. The interview data revealed that all the SUs were struggling to meet the volume of student demand. Klemenčič (2014) suggests that a more heterogeneous SU membership the more difficult it is for SUs to create a collective student identity and to identify common student grievances. By extension this problem is compounded by students adopting a more individualistic and self-interested stance towards their HE experience. All of the SUs in the sample said how the range of student interests and issues had challenged their capacity to respond. One example, which was typical across the sample, was that a SU had had to deal with demands for support from student interest groups with opposing, often political, views. The interview data suggest that in order to protect the SU position EOs had remained neutral and apolitical. This was more difficult for EOs in SU5 and SU6 who because of their strong political views found it difficult to represent or support groups with different beliefs. In this respect it can be argued that a larger

more diverse membership is likely to act as a constraint on SUs adopting or supporting particular political positions for fear of excluding some members.

The data also revealed that the nature of SU representation had been impacted by the attribution of roles in quality assurance processes by their host HEI and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The former involved EOs attending institutional committees charged with overseeing quality and responding to related student issues. The data also suggested that most of the SUs were involved in the election, training and induction of course representatives, which was another element of quality assurance and which institutions regarded as a key responsibility of SUs. Course representatives were typically elected from current students at the commencement of the academic year and usually served a one-year term of office. The interview data revealed that this process was time consuming and demanding of union resources, made more challenging in some cases by the reluctance of students to stand for course representative positions. Another dimension of quality assurance was the opportunity for SUs to prepare, on behalf of students, a student submission to the external institutional review process undertaken by the QAA. Institutional reviews were typically conducted on a five-year cycle and student representatives had become full members of review teams from 2009 (Brown, 2013, p.105). The interview data suggested that the increasing importance of quality assurance and the student voice had strengthened perceptions in HEIs that the sole role and function of the SU was representation.

6.3 Engaging with Students

6.3.1 Open door policy

The interview results revealed how the student-led approach adopted by all the SUs in the sample shaped the way unions engaged with their student members. This was consistent with the strategy or approach adopted aimed at securing and maintaining student engagement and building support and loyalty. The data revealed that all the SUs in the sample had 'opened up' to students to improve access to EOs and union staff. Whilst the student-led approach manifest in slightly different ways a commitment to involving students in determining the work, priorities and actions of the SU was universal across the sample. It was this commitment perhaps more than any other feature that shaped the way EOs perceived and operationalised their role and responsibilities. This was also reinforced by CEOs who believed that the central role of EOs was to get out and meet with students and be visible around campus. Interview results confirmed that EOs were strongly encouraged by CEOs to fulfil this role as a way of soliciting student opinions, to let students know what the union was doing and had achieved on their behalf, and encourage students to get involved in the union. The data revealed that opening up SUs had also changed working practices. In most of the sample SUs EOs had been relocated to offices in

"front of house" locations close to student social spaces. Respondents said this had raised the profile of the SU and had made it easier for students to raise issues with EOs. Interview data suggested that whilst EOs supported these changes they found it consumed a lot of their time and added to their already heavy workloads.

6.3.2 Website and Social Media

All of the SUs in the sample pointed to their website as an important part of their strategy for improving student engagement and as a primary way of eliciting student preferences and needs. The website fulfilled a number of functions including as a promotional tool for the union, as a portal, and a means of providing feedback to students. The interview data suggested the increasing importance of the SU website as a means of promoting union activities and as an interface with students. A review of a sample of 30 SU websites across a representative group of SUs was consistent with this finding. The data revealed that most of the websites were individual in design, but most were similar in content and purpose. All included profiles of EOs, their contact details, social media addresses, and their manifesto pledges. The websites promoted and publicised union activities, events and achievements to current students. Some of the sites mimicked the 'you said we did' campaigns similar to those run by some HEIs as a way of confirming the student led nature of union activities and actions. Some websites also provided regular updates on EOs' progress against manifesto promises. All of the websites in the sample also operated as a portal or gateway for students to submit their views and ideas about what the union should be doing on their behalf. The interview data revealed that for most of the SUs their website had become a principal tool in collecting student feedback and identifying student needs. A central and universal message on all the websites was that SUs were run by students for students. It was therefore not surprising that none of the websites mentioned the CEO or permanent staff employed by the union. Some of the EOs interviewed were keen to point out the website also provided an opportunity to launch SU campaigns, for example, equality, to raise awareness of what were regarded as collective issues or concerns. The proactive use of websites illustrates how the characteristics of SU membership have changed operational practices in SUs.

The interview data also revealed that all the EOs in the sample increasingly used social media, for example, WhatsApp, Facebook, to communicate with student members and other EOs. The interview data suggested that these platforms were seen as further opportunities to engage and connect with students and to keep students up to date on what EOs and the SU were doing on their behalf and to offer opportunities for feedback. Some EOs commented that whilst they valued student feedback the downside of social media was that some students used it to criticise or attack EOs and the SU anonymously. A minority of EOs said they had been

'trolled' – viciously attacked online through social media, and that this had shaken their confidence in students. The interview data also revealed that SUs were spending increasing amounts of time responding to or countering inaccurate and misleading views about SU activities or intentions posted on social media sites.

6.3.3 Employability

Much of the literature suggests that marketisation highlights how HE has been reconceptualised as a service to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to secure a good job after graduation (Naidoo and Williams, 2015) and that this had influenced student perceptions. The interview data supported this shift in student perceptions revealing that a significant number of students were focused on finding a good job after graduation and that many were seeking opportunities to gain skills and experience outside their course of study. In response to this student need all of the SUs in the sample had actively promoted opportunities for students to develop skills and experience, for example, through volunteering and team leadership in sports, as being valued in the job market. This supports Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington (2015) who suggest that SUs are spending more time promoting and providing students with opportunities through union activities to acquire skills and experience of value in the employment market. The interview data suggested a belief that supporting students in developing their CV increased student engagement with the SU whilst also confirming the value and relevance of the SU to the student experience. Some EOs also said that getting students involved in union activities had proved useful in raising student interest in standing for EO positions. The presentation of student engagement with the SU as a way of improving job prospects perhaps demonstrates how the SUs in the sample were drawn into and influenced by the consumer model of HE.

6.3.4 Localisation and National Campaigns

Analysis of the data suggested that focusing on the student experience had localised student issues and that this had had a negative impact on support for national campaigns promoted and led by the NUS. Tomlinson (2017) suggests that the conceptualisation of the student as consumer was reinforced by the increase in tuition fees in 2012 intensifying student consumer orientations, which promoted a more individualist approach and a focus on 'self' (Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). Analysis of the data revealed strong perceptions that students were more assertive and focused on obtaining value for money from their HE experience. This had a tendency to localise student issues, which in turn shaped SU agendas and priorities. This localisation was compounded by attempts by SUs to engage students and encourage them to see the union as the route to resolving their issues or grievances. Analysis of interview data revealed that SU campaigns tended to focus

on improving the student experience, for example, campaigning for better library provision.

The data revealed that the localisation of student issues was not universally accepted across the sample. Nearly all the EOs in SU5 and SU6 resisted the focus on local issues because of the negative impact this had on national campaigning, which they regarded as a central function of SUs. The data revealed that EOs in SU5 and SU6 were frustrated by often being drawn in to resolve what some regarded as 'domestic issues'. They believed that representation had to include representing the collective interests of students at a national level. They continued to make efforts individually to engage with and promote national campaigns led by the NUS. However, even in SUs with a tradition of political activism the impact of student as consumer was strengthening as a trend. EOs from SU1 to SU4 said that support for NUS campaigns was dependent on their relevance judged by how EOs felt students would respond. This revealed how student preferences and needs, mainly relating to their experience and obtaining value for money, were leading SU priorities and actions. It also suggests that students' judgement about the effectiveness of their SU was likely to depend on the success of unions in resolving these local issues. The interview data suggested that resolving local issues had increased the frequency of contacts between SUs and their host HEIs.

6.4 Engaging with their Higher Education Institution

6.4.1 Formal Committees

The principle of student participation in institutions' governance structures was established in the 1970s as a response to student activism in the 1960s (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). All of the SUs in the sample were represented on major institutional committees, which typically involved EOs attending between three and six committee meetings during the academic year, with some sitting on more than one committee. Meetings usually lasted approximately three hours and demanded preparation in terms of reading papers. The data revealed that many EOs regarded formal committees as a poor use of their time because they said most of the business, for example, approving policies, had already been agreed outside of meetings. Many EOs struggled to find value in their attendance particularly when their time was at a premium and it took them away from students and their other interests. As one EO remarked committees are used by HEIs as "weapons of mass distraction…" to keep EOs occupied and out of trouble. In contrast CEOs viewed committee attendance as an important part of the SUs representative function, which can be explained with reference to what some suggest is an exchange relationship between SUs and their host HEI (Klemenčič, 2014). An important element of this exchange relationship is that SUs are viewed as important stakeholder groups in legitimising HEI policy (Klemenčič, 2012a). Some argue that

the SU involvement in committees has effectively 'domesticated' the student voice (Morley, 2003) and by doing so 'confirms the consumer identity of students (Williams, 2013).' Whilst this may be true its relevance to SUs is likely to have diminished with the shift in power from collegial committee structures to executive decision-making structures.

The interview data suggests that there was one exception to the general view expressed by EOs about committees and that was attendance at governing body meetings. Governing body meetings were usually attended by the SU President (or designated officer) and were viewed by the SUs in the sample as an important opportunity to get to know and build a relationship with external governors. Most of the Presidents in the sample said that external governors were sensitive to students' concerns and said that raising issues in conversation prior to the start of a meeting nearly always resulted in external governors raising the matter, and this had proved an effect way of promoting student interests. Data from interviews with CEOs also revealed how governing body meetings were perceived as an important opportunity to demonstrate that the SU was a serious and professional organisation, and this was reflected in the professional approach adopted to preparations for meetings. In most cases the SU senior leadership teams considered the agenda for governing body meetings in advance and Presidents were briefed before meetings and reported back to the team. There was some resistance by Presidents in SU5 and SU6 who said they were aware that student representatives in other SUs had been advised to 'dress smartly' for governing body meetings and that this had been suggested to them, which they had rejected. The President of SU6 said: "I am a student and I dress like a student…and as the student representative students expect me to dress like a student…". This final comment perhaps reveals the risk to SU independence of EOs being perceived as being too close to their institution (Little et al., 2009).

6.4.2 Informal Contacts

The interview data revealed that informal representation through contacts with senior institutional managers was regarded by officers as a more effective way of "getting things done" than attendance at formal committees. The analysis of data supported the literature in noting that executive leadership structures had replaced more democratic forms of decision making through formal committee structures in the HEIs in the sample locating power and influence with executive groups consisting of senior institutional managers (Deem, 2004). A key point is that whilst SUs are represented on formal committees (see above) they are not usually represented in executive structures (Klemenčič, M., 2012a, pp. 15). The analysis of interview data revealed that in response to this shift all the SUs in the sample had focused their efforts on resolving student issues and influencing policy through

informal relations and contacts with senior institutional mangers. All the SUs were active in establishing and managing relationships between EOs and senior institutional managers. Given their relatively short time in office EOs were very aware that they had to build trust and credibility with senior institutional managers quickly. A number of EOs commented on how useful the SU induction programme had been in preparing them for this role. Nearly all the CEOs said that all or most of the meetings with senior institutional managers were fronted by EOs and emphasised how important it was for senior managers to understand that it was EOs that were elected by students to run the SU and not the CEO. This contrasted with the findings of Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) who suggest that non-elected permanent staff were increasingly replacing EOs at meetings with senior university managers. The perceptions of senior institutional managers were perhaps reflective of the managerialist culture in HEIs perhaps combined with the use of the title CEO. The data also revealed the growing importance of senior institutional managers responsible for professional services, for example, the Director of Estates, and how some SUs in the sample had developed contacts that had proved useful in getting student issues resolved quickly.

The interview data revealed that Presidents were under particular pressure from their host HEI to attend meetings with senior institutional managers to represent the SU. This was in part explained by perceptions in some HEIs that the President was senior to other EOs. All of the Presidents (except the President of SU2, who was promised meetings with the Vice Chancellor (VC) that did not materialise) said that they had a good relationship with the VC, maintained in most cases through a regular meeting over coffee. Most of the unions saw this relationship as critical to maintaining the trust of their HEI. It also provided, for some SUs, a final point of 'appeal', what one President described as "pushing the nuclear button", if they found that their efforts to resolve an important student issue had failed through other channels.

The data revealed that the HEIs in the sample determined the representational structures or the 'rules of engagement' between senior institutional managers and SU representatives (Klemencic, 2012a). The analysis of data suggested that all the SUs in the sample said they had developed good relationships with senior institutional managers and that meetings with EOs happened on a regular basis. This is perhaps not surprising given the importance of the student experience and the role of the SU in representing the student voice. However, it does raise a key point that the availability and openness of senior institutional managers to the SU is likely to have a significant impact on the ability of SUs to influence decision-making. Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) suggest that more co-operative relations between union officers and senior university managers can be explained in terms of an alignment of values, with both facing the same competitive market forces. This

suggested alignment of values was not evident in the analysis of data rather it suggested that SUs had come to accept the political reality of their relationship with their host HEI, and that more co-operative working relationships were more about realpolitik than a shared set of values or beliefs.

The SUs in the sample approached their relationship with their host HEI in a systematic and organised way and were very aware of how to get the best out of the relationship in terms of achieving their goals. The data revealed a real sense that SUs were politically savvy and recognised the political nature of decision-making in their host HEI (Ferris et al., 2007). An illustrative example, cited in a number of interviews, was events organised by the institution to which SUs were invited and which provided a good opportunity in more relaxed surroundings to connect with senior institutional managers and to get them 'on side'. This perhaps reveals the political awareness of SUs to opportunities to influence. Analysis of interview data suggested that most of the SUs had established protocols that required SU officers to report back to their senior leadership team on meetings with senior institutional managers, and in some SUs a record was retained to track progress on issues and as part of the organisational memory. This revealed a systematic approach by SUs to managing the relationship with their host HEI. It also facilitated the handover of information from outgoing to incoming EOs, which enabled them to build on established relationships with senior institutional managers.

6.5 Officers' Roles and Responsibilities

6.5.1 Elected Officers

The interview data revealed that the relatively short term of office and the inexperience of most EOs had a significant impact on how they fulfilled their roles and responsibilities. Most of the EOs were serving a one-year term of office (some unions have provision for re-election for a second term). Nearly all the EOs in the SUs in the study said that they had limited or no experience of full-time work and that this was their first experience of a full-time paid position. A small number of EOs in SU4 (1 EO) and SU6 (2 EOs) were serving second terms. The NUS suggests that EOs have four roles: activist, representative, minister, and trustee (NUS, 2009). In general candidates for sabbatical positions, other than those standing for President (five of the six SUs had Presidents) stood for election for particular sabbatical positions, for example, sports or education, and this determined their primary responsibilities. All the EOs were members of the senior leadership team or equivalent, and shared collective responsibility for the operation of the union and its actions.

The interview data suggested that in most of the SUs there was a notable difference between how EOs with a specialist role, for example, sports or volunteering, and those with a more generalist role, for example, education, including the President of the union, fulfilled their responsibilities. The latter tended to be involved in serving on major institutional committees and were the point of connect for representational or policy issues, which meant that they tended to have closer working relationships with senior institutional managers. With the shift in SUs toward representation these roles had taken on a higher profile in the SU and the HEI. The findings revealed that EOs involved in specialist functions tended to spend the majority of their time on their specific area of responsibility and this distanced them from the formulation of general union policy and the representation function. Some EOs in specialist areas said that they felt isolated from other EOs and were overwhelmed by workloads. This can be explained, at least in part, as a consequence of increased student demand for specialist activities and a commitment to providing students with a good experience. This specialisation of EO roles impacted negatively on the dynamics and cohesion of the SU team in most of the SUs in the sample. The impact of specialisation was less evident in SU5 and SU6, the EOs in these unions felt strongly that they had collective responsibility for union policy and said that they were closer to debates and decision-making and that there was a more coherent team.

The data revealed that the establishment of a Trustee Board following charity registration had a significant impact on EOs who served as trustees. Many EO trustees commented on how this role had come to dominate their responsibilities and thinking, and that it had added significantly to their workloads. Some said that being a trustee had sensitised them to the wider implications of union decisions and actions, and some suggested that this made them cautious and dampened their enthusiasm and support for what might be regarded as more 'radical' or challenging courses of action. This was an indication of how responsibility and accountability, and external regulation, worked to control and constrain the actions of some SUs.

The analysis of interview data suggested that EOs were struggling to fulfil their multiple roles (NUS, 2009) because of the volume and complexity of their work. Most of the EOs in the sample commented on how they had found it difficult to reconcile and balance the demands of their various roles and many said that if they had known this beforehand they would have thought more seriously about standing for office. This was true even for those EOs who had previous experience of their union as part-time officers. Most of the EOs said there was no job description or equivalent but rather outline statements of their role and that the SU tended to depend on the handover between outgoing and incoming officers to introduce new members to their role. This vagueness left the role of EO open to interpretation. The analysis of data strongly suggests that the roles undertaken by EOs varied

when compared to the four roles published by the NUS (2009) with nearly all EOs tending to focus on one or two roles. The interview data suggested that a determining factor was workload, which was particularly notable for EOs with specialist responsibilities who tended to focus on their 'minister' role (NUS, 2009). In most cases the activist role did not feature. This was less true for EOs in SU5 and SU6 who had prioritised their activist role above other pressures on their time. Some expressed frustration that the range of responsibilities and the focus on the 'local' representative function, the trustee role, and planning and management issues, made it almost impossible for them to fulfil the role of activist, which they considered to be a vital part of the role and the function of SUs. Most used NUS events to build networks of EOs with similar political views and interests, and to connect with NUS officers responsible for national campaigns. Nearly all said that they had joined the union to make a difference through involvement in national campaigning, and some suggested that the localisation of student issues was effectively de-politicising SUs (Rochford, 2014). This resistance created tensions between EOs and their CEO over SU priorities and the use of officer time.

6.5.2 Chief Executive Officer

There is very little research on the role or the influence of SU CEOs. The CEO title is relatively new and replaced what was previously the union General Manager position in the sample SUs. Nearly all the CEOs in the sample had held the position of General Manager and had worked or been involved in SUs for more than 10 years, and many had served as EOs. As such they were able to reflect on their experience of the way SUs had changed in recent times and the way their roles have evolved. The interview results showed that CEOs believed that the single biggest change to their role had happened as a consequence of charity registration. All of the CEOs commented on how charity registration had demanded new knowledge and expertise and had significantly increased their responsibilities and workloads. Data from interviews with CEOs suggested that the Trustee Board had become a focal point for their work. All the CEOs in the sample said they were personally responsible and accountable to the Board for the management and operation of the union. CEOs suggested that the appointment of ETs had added valuable professional expertise and experience in support of the governance and management of their SUs. Some CEOs also said how ETs had strengthened the credibility of the SU with their host HEI and other stakeholders. These beliefs reveal the importance of external perceptions, particularly those of the host HEI, about the governance and management of the SU. It also demonstrates how changes in external regulatory requirements impacted on the organisation and management of SUs.

The analysis of data revealed that in terms of their professional identity CEOs identified strongly with the charity sector. Nearly all of the CEOs said they regarded themselves as professional managers, and many cited their experience in HE and their postgraduate qualifications as evidence. All of the CEOs said that their role could legitimately be compared to that of the CEO in most charities. Most of the CEOs said that charity registration had opened up wider career opportunities for them. The interview data revealed that CEOs had developed national networks and were working collaboratively with other CEOs towards achieving professional recognition for SU management. Some had extended their networks to include CEOs and other professionals in the charity sector. A number of references were made to international examples of the professionalisation of SUs or equivalent, particularly in the USA. The identities and perceptions of CEOs reveal the impact of charity registration on SUs and how in particular it had shaped CEOs perceptions of their role and responsibilities. It also illustrates the power of regulatory change in influencing the purpose of organisations and its managers. An interesting finding was that some CEOs had developed networks with CEOs in universities that had partnership arrangements with their host HEI, viewing these as useful ways of sharing common interests and concerns. Charity registration and the establishment of the Trustee Board with ETs appeared to have strengthened the position and importance of the CEO.

The interview data suggested that CEOs were responsible for the management of the SU including permanent staff, its finances and the delivery of the strategic plan. The data also revealed an emphasis on the need for the SU to operate consistent with its constitution, particularly its charitable objects, and rules and other requirements, for example, financial reporting required by their host HEI. The need to protect the SU's reputation and to manage external perceptions in order to maintain credibility with members and their host HEI was a recurring theme. All the CEOs believed strongly that the SU should be perceived as a professional well-managed business-like organisation. The data also revealed that the terms 'professional', 'professionalisation' and 'professionalism' were embedded in the vocabulary used by CEOs to describe expected behaviours and practice. Evetts (2011) suggests that professionalisation can take the form of a management narrative as a means of establishing and shaping expected standards of behaviour. The interview data revealed that CEOs felt strongly that the purpose of SUs was to represent and protect members' interests. When asked about the role of the EOs there was a general consensus that EOs had to be 'student facing' and that their primary function was to engage with students. Most of the CEOs said that a significant part of their job was to ensure that EOs understood their roles and responsibilities and received appropriate advice and support. All the CEOs were keen to confirm that it was the EOs who were responsible and accountable to the membership for running the union and that the role of the CEO was to support them

in this role. The analysis of data suggested that CEOs felt strongly that SUs should be led by the preferences and needs of their student membership.

6.5.3 The Working Relationship

The literature on SUs is relatively quiet about how the relationship between EOs and the CEO in SUs operates and the factors that shape this relationship. EOs and CEOs have very different roles and responsibilities. Brooks, Byford and Sela (2015a) suggest that the importance of permanent staff had increased at the expense of EOs (pp173). The analysis of data suggested a fluid and dynamic relationship between EOs and their CEO (and other permanent staff). Many of the CEOs compared their relationship with EOs to that of a government minister and civil servant, the CEO being the civil servant (cf. Neuhold, Vanhoonacker and Verhey, 2013). The analysis of data suggested that this comparison perhaps failed to acknowledge the significant gap in knowledge and experience between CEOs and EOs.

The analysis revealed a significant power asymmetry between the CEO and EOs as a result of the significant gap in experience and expertise between the EOs and the CEO, which was particularly apparent at the start of the EOs' term of office. Most of the EOs in the study were aware of their inexperience and lack of knowledge and many had attempted to bridge this gap by developing networks of contacts and sources of information and advice outside of their union. The data suggested that EOs who attended the NUS conference for incoming officers at the start of their year in office used the opportunity to develop networks with EOs with similar roles and responsibilities and establish sources of advice. Most of the EOs said that they used these networks on a regular basis to gather information, share practice, and test ideas outside of their own union. The data suggests that in some ways the active use of networks went some way to mitigate the power asymmetry between EOs and their CEO. The data also revealed that EOs (similar to CEOs) had built networks with EOs in HEIs that had similar status and characteristics to their host institution, explained in terms of them facing similar issues. This was an interesting finding and suggests that SUs may start to form alliances of interest mirroring those of their host HEI. The interview data suggested that EOs were heavily reliant on the CEO (and other permanent staff). This placed the CEO in a strong position to influence EOs and the operation of the SU.

The data revealed that whilst the relationships between EOs and CEOs varied across the sample there were some common trends. In SU1, 2, 3 and 4 there was a very strong relationship between the President and the CEO. In most of the SUs in the study the President and CEO's offices were located close to each other and this

made it easier to meet on a regular basis and for the relationship to build and function. Some Presidents were aware of the potential impact of this on other EOs and emphasised their position as *primus inter pares*. EOs whose responsibilities included representation, for example, education, usually had more regular contact with the CEO and President. The interview results suggested that some of the EOs in these unions, particularly those with specialist functions, for example, sports or volunteering, felt marginalised and distant from the CEO and, to a lesser extent, the President. Much of their time was spent working with permanent staff to deliver the specialist service for which they were responsible. Some of the EOs perceptions were that this created a hierarchy amongst EOs. This was less evident in SU5 and SU6 where the EOs worked more as a team on a range of policy and campaign initiatives and there was less sense of a hierarchy. In these unions the relationship between EOs and the CEO was characterised by a clearer demarcation of responsibilities with EOs emphasising that the CEO was responsible to them for the efficient running of the SU. The interview data suggested that this often led to tensions between the EOs and their CEO. The degree to which EOs formed a coherent group was mixed across the sample. The data suggested that the bond was stronger between EOs who also socialised together. Those serving their second term tended not to mix socially with EOs in their first term. The data revealed that whilst there were general trends across the sample the relationships between EOs and EOs and their CEOs were affected by the personalities involved. However, SU structures and operating practices reinforced by induction and training for EOs tended to normalise behaviours.

6.5.4 Induction and Training

The data revealed that all of the SUs in the sample had developed formal induction and training programmes for new EOs as part of the handover between outgoing and incoming officers. This contrasted with Rodgers et al. (2011) who suggest that the provision of training in SUs varies significantly across unions and that this disadvantaged some unions. The findings from this study perhaps reveal how far SUs had developed since Rodgers et al. conducted their research in 2011. All the unions in the sample had structured in-house induction programmes for new EOs usually delivered over two to three weeks in the summer period as part of a formal handover between outgoing and incoming EOs. Samples of the induction programmes for most of the unions were viewed and revealed a detailed programme of activities, with some involving external input, for example, from legal experts. In most of the unions the content of the induction programme was devised by permanent staff and the CEO and approved by outgoing EOs. The data revealed that all of the CEOs played a central role in the delivery of the induction programme. The aims of the programme included the effective handover from outgoing to incoming EOs, team building, understanding roles and responsibilities, and managing relationships with senior institutional managers. The use of business

or corporate language was prominent in programmes, explained by CEOs as an important part of familiarising EOs with the vocabulary and terms used by senior institutional managers. There was also a strong emphasis on what CEOs referred to as professional values, which included EOs taking responsibility for areas of work and being accountable to the wider team. Many EOs commented on how intensive their induction had been, what some EOs referred to as a "baptism of fire". All of the unions in the sample also organised training events for EOs throughout the year. The data suggests that induction and training had a very specific purpose - to get inexperienced EOs up to speed with their role and responsibilities as quickly as possible.

The data also revealed that most of the SUs operated a mentoring scheme for EOs. This typically included partnering EOs with the CEO (usually the President) or other permanent members of staff. In some unions ETs also acted as mentors. This also reinforced the role and purpose of the union and those working for it. This was regarded, primarily by CEOs, as one way of getting EOs up to speed and allowed for the transfer of knowledge and skills from permanent professional staff to EOs.

The induction and training programme can be understood by locating the role of EOs in relation to the approaches adopted by SUs to engage with their membership and the HEI. The student-led approach increased the importance and visibility of EOs as the front-line key point of contact for students. EOs were also central to the relationship between SUs and their HEI. The relationship between the SU and their host HEI figured prominently in the induction programme, and significant time was spent on how the HEI worked and the tactics adopted by SUs to influence decision makers and decision-making. Interview data from conversations with CEOs suggested that preparing EOs for engagement with senior institutional managers was critical. This revealed how focused the SUs in the sample were on ensuring effective intermediation between their SU and their host HEI. Induction and training can be seen as SUs endeavouring to achieve consistency and also an attempt to mitigate the risks posed by inexperienced or idealistic EOs.

The interview data revealed that most EOs had found elements of the induction and training useful. The analysis of data suggested that most EOs had also attended NUS training events, which most had found useful. This contrasted with the views of some CEOs who commented that NUS training was generally useful for EOs but that it often focused too much on the EO activist role and the fact that they were responsible for and "in charge' of the SU. This suggested a disconnect between the emphasis of in-house induction and training and that provided by the NUS. EOs in SU5 and SU6 were less enthusiastic about in-house induction and training and their engagement with the programme was mixed. Some said that they often disagreed

with permanent staff about union priorities. EOs from SU5 and SU6 were very enthusiastic about NUS training and tried to attend as many events as possible.

6.6 Management and Decision-Making

6.6.1 Planning

The data revealed that all of the SUs in the sample had adopted a formal planned approach to the management of priorities and funds. Nearly all the unions in the sample had approved a strategic plan or equivalent, typically covering a three or five-year period. The data analysis suggested that multi-year planning provided stability, continuity and some certainty. The Strategic Plan was usually approved and amended by the senior leadership team and provided a key reference for decision-making. Changing plans involved bureaucratic processes and approvals. The interview data suggested that strategic plans were a relatively new phenomenon in SUs. The CEO was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the plan. The interview data suggested that the strategic plan was largely a response to the complexity of managing and operating the SU and the expectations of the host HEI. It was noted that strategic planning as a process was embedded in HEIs, which suggested that SUs were mirroring this process in managing and planning their own resources.

The data suggests that multiple year planning acted as a constraint on in year proposals that were not already in the strategic plan. In interviews with CEOs it was suggested that whilst every effort was made to involve the senior team in creating and approving the strategic plan the timeframes involved sometimes made it difficult for EOs to make a meaningful contribution. The strategic planning process revealed a number of issues, notably the impact an HEI's cycle and timing for receiving and approving budget plans (which was common to all the HEIs in the sample). The SUs in the sample were reliant on their HEIs for most of their funding so the budget approval process was critical to their operation. Budget proposals were typically required by the institution six to nine months in advance of the year to which they applied, usually before new EOs were elected. This meant that incoming EOs had to work with a budget that was largely approved by their predecessors. The analysis also revealed that most of the SUs were reliant on their host HEI for other resources, for example, accommodation (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015c). The cycle for approving bids relating to accommodation was normally longer than for funding. It could be argued that resource dependency and the associated approval cycles impact on SUs in two ways. Firstly, as a constraint on in-year changes to budgets, which impacted new EOs. Secondly, reliance on outgoing EOs approving budgets for their successors. This revealed some of the practical implications of resource dependency on their host HEI and the limitations this can place on the ambitions of EOs.

The analysis of data revealed the different perspectives of EOs and CEOs in relation to the planning and budgetary approval cycles. The priority for EOs was on getting things done in the short-term, what many described as "short-term wins". This can be explained in terms of their ambitions and the relative short time, usually less than 12 months, in which they had to make an impact. As such they preferred to spend time delivering on their manifesto promises ("their legacy") and dealing with more immediate student concerns; many were also motivated by delivering achievements that they could include in their CV. This linked to a key reason why most of the EOs said they had stood for office, because the felt the experience and skills gained would improve their employment prospects. They were generally less interested in the union's medium to longer-term ambitions. The implication was that most of the EOs said that because of constraints on budgets they had to achieve their goals by utilising available resources. The interview analysis revealed that CEOs tended to focus on medium to longer-term projects and financial sustainability, which was dealt with largely through the strategic planning process. Interview responses from CEOs suggested that financial sustainability was very much their priority and seen as an important factor in building trust and credibility with their host HEI and other stakeholders. The different perspectives of EOs and CEOs sometimes created tensions and impacted on the operation of the SU senior leadership team and decision-making.

6.6.2 Evidence-Based Decisions

A key finding from the analysis of data was how providing evidence in support of proposals and decision-making had become embedded as part of the operation of the SUs in the sample. The interview data suggested that this approach served a number of purposes, notably what CEOs believed to be an improved decision-making process and perhaps as important demonstrating for the purposes of external scrutiny that the union was managing its affairs professionally. In interviews CEOs explained that an evidence-based approach had become standard practice in their host HEI and an expectation in support of SU proposals to their HEI for resources. Many suggested that SU bids had been more successful as a consequence, and that the quality of bids had strengthened the confidence and trust HEIs had in the union. Rodgers et al. (2011) suggest that a number of historical examples of SUs having to be bailed out financially by their host HEI and that this had brought into question the competence of SUs to manage their own affairs. The analysis of data suggested that SUs worked hard to demonstrate through their management practices that they were competent particularly in terms of financial management. Another important feature of this approach was the provision of statistical evidence, for example, the analysis of interview data revealed that SUs actively collected data on student usage of SU services and activities as a means of improving the provision of services to students, to support proposals for additional

resources, and as a means of demonstrating their value to their HEI. This evidence-based approach was also adopted in support of proposals to change institutional policy and action to change institutional practice. Interview data suggested that SUs often used NSS outcomes or the institution's own student satisfaction surveys, and data and information from HE sector resources, to support their arguments and proposals. Some SUs had or were considering appointing a permanent member of staff to undertake research to support this practice. This perhaps provides another example of the 'logic of influence' (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999) how SUs had felt it necessary to mirror their host HEI's management practices in order improve their effectiveness in influencing institutional decision-making.

6.6.3 Senior Leadership Team

The interview data revealed that in nearly all the SUs in the sample the senior leadership team or equivalent group made most of the major decisions. Senior leadership teams tended to meet on a weekly basis and typically consisted of the EOs and the CEO, with other members of SU staff invited to attend if their expertise was required. All the respondents were clear that final responsibility for union decisions rested with EOs and that the role of the CEO was to advise and support them in this process. The chairing of meetings varied across the sample; sometimes it was the President, or another EO and sometimes the CEO. The data revealed that nearly all the SUs had conventions for the conduct of meetings, which included, the circulation of agendas – which were open to members, and a record of discussions and decisions. Meeting conventions generally specified that any proposals seeking resources needed to be accompanied by written support and received in sufficient time for members to consider. Major decisions tended to be framed by the strategic plan. The data revealed that it was generally exceptional for proposals requesting resources outside of agreed and approved budgets to be approved. The interview results suggest a strong emphasise on the importance of members accepting and abiding by the rules of collective responsibility. The operation of senior leadership teams reflected a managed approach to decision-making that included evidence of due process in most of the sample SUs.

The interview data suggested that most EOs felt that the senior team worked well and that they were involved in decision-making. Some EOs commented that the President and CEO tended to take the lead on setting agendas. Some EOs commented that meetings tended to be dominated by management and operational priorities, which took up most of the agenda and often left little time to discuss projects or campaigns proposed by EOs. EOs in SU5 and SU6 said they tried to avoid meetings on general management and finances because they felt that this was the responsibility of the CEO. They focussed on student campaigns and the development of union policy. There was a strong sense from EOs in this group that

they were responsible for determining SU priorities and policy and that the CEO was responsible for managing the union and permanent staff under their direction. The interview data suggested that this often led to tensions between EOs and the CEO.

6.7 Conclusions

This chapter discussed the implications of the findings of this study with reference to the literature and drew on the conceptual framework in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999), which proved to be a useful device for understanding change in contemporary SUs. This final section draws together some conclusions based on the discussion.

This study reveals that independence is critical to SUs operating effectively as intermediary membership organisations between students and their HEI. As such it argues that SUs must protect their independence if they are to represent and promote the interests of their student members. SU independence derives from their legal status, which is formally recognised in legislation, and how they are resourced. SUs are dependent on government for their legal status and principles that impact on their funding. This means SUs are vulnerable to national political change. SUs are also dependent on their host HEI for most or all the resources they need to operate. This resource dependency means that SUs are at risk of their host HEI using access to resources to steer and influence their SU. SUs in this study believed that securing and maintaining high levels of student support and loyalty mitigated these risks, at least in part, by demonstrating their value and relevance. In this respect students also represent a potential political resource from which SUs can draw influence. This strategy of building student support was adopted by all the SUs in the sample.

It is suggested that marketisation increases student consumer orientations, which manifest as self-interest and individualism. It is argued that the significant increase in tuition fees in 2012 financially empowered students and increased student consumer orientations effectively focussing student interest on obtaining value for money from their HE experience. Student interests in this context can be defined as student preferences and needs in relation to their HE experience, that is, the totality of a student's engagement with their HEI. This in turn localises student issues and concerns. This study suggests that in order to secure and maintain student support SUs have to respond to student preferences and needs. The 'logic of membership' (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999) suggests that the operational features of SUs will be influenced by student preferences and needs, that is, the characteristics of their membership. The ways in which the SUs in this study engage with their

student members are presented as evidence of how the characteristics of membership shaped how they organise and impacted on the roles and responsibilities of SU officers.

It follows that to secure and maintain student support SUs need to be effective in resolving issues raised by students. To achieve this they have to intermediate between students and their HEI. The 'logic of influence' (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981/1999) suggests that in order to be effective SUs will be affected by the dominant characteristics of their host HEI. The literature argues that contemporary HEIs are dominated by a management culture and executive decision-making, characterised by the use of management practices and technologies drawn from the private sector. This study suggests that there is evidence that the SUs in this study had adopted these same practices and technologies. The study also suggests a number of other factors that influenced the organisational characteristics of the SUs in the sample, notably changes in external regulation and in particular charity legislation and the influence of the SU CEO. These factors need to be considered in any analysis of change in contemporary SUs.

The analysis of data revealed that the organisational features and approaches adopted by all the SUs in the sample were recognisably similar. The literature suggests that more corporate HEIs, primarily post 92 institutions, are likely to be more controlling of their SUs (Rochford, 2014). This was not evident from the analysis of data. Given that the SUs in the sample were representative of a range of institutional contexts this was surprising. However, the similarities can, at least in part, be explained in terms of the sharing of management practices and organisational models, particularly by CEOs through strong national networks. This would suggest isomorphic tendencies (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983).

Finally, this study suggests that any analysis of change in contemporary SUs should acknowledge that SUs are complex organisations and that their democratic constitution demands particular consideration. Most SUs have to manage large and diverse memberships and substantial budgets, and are constrained by regulatory requirements. The democratic nature of SUs means that whilst the SU CEO manages the union formal responsibility and accountability rests with EOs. This study suggests that the roles, identities, and beliefs of EOs and CEOs impact on what they consider to be SU priorities. In most of the SUs in the study EOs and CEOs broadly agreed on the purpose of the SU and their respective roles and responsibilities but often there were tensions over union priorities. In SU5 and SU6 a strong tradition of political activism underpinned the relationship between EOs and the CEO, and this led to more fundamental disagreements about SU priorities and the role of EOs. EOs in these SUs resisted the shift to a focus on local student

issues and continued to pursue an activist agenda that included proactive involvement in national campaigns. These different perceptions about the role and purpose of SUs and the role of EOs affected the team dynamic and decision-making. However, this said, the organisational features and approaches adopted by SU5 and SU6 were similar to those in the rest of the sample, which suggests that resistance from EOs had not stopped the transition towards a more consumer friendly model of student unionism.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This study was motivated by a desire to understand more about how Higher Education (HE) reforms were impacting on the way Students' Unions (SUs) operate from the perspective of the officers who run SUs. This interest was triggered by the findings of an empirical study of change in SUs that suggests that permanent staff in unions are gaining power at the expense of elected officers (EOs) (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). It was this finding that raised questions about how and why the roles of SU officers were changing, what impact this was having on the dynamic between officers and union decision-making, and the way SUs are managed and operate.

The literature Review (Chapter 3) revealed a complex and dynamic HE sector in the UK transformed by significant expansion and marketisation. These changes have increased the size and diversity of the student body, whilst at the same time reconceptualising students as consumers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as providers of HE services (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Student choice and competition between HE providers are promoted by policy makers as the best way to deliver an efficient and effective HE sector (Brown, 2013). HEIs have responded by adopting corporate governance and executive management structures that diminish the importance and function of more traditional democratic collegiate approaches to decision-making (Deem, 2008). SUs as the representative body for students operate within this context.

The literature on SUs is relatively small and is a combination of theoretical works with a 'high degree of abstraction' (Klemencic, 2012, 2014) and empirical studies (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). The empirical studies tend to focus on how the consumerisation of HE within the context of the 'neoliberal' university has affected the role and functions of SUs. The literature suggests, as a universal trend, that SUs have shifted their emphasis towards their representation function, primarily as a response to the increasing consumer-orientation of students, which focuses student attention on their HE experience and obtaining value for money from their HEI. It is suggested that this consumerisation localises student issues and SU agendas. There is a tendency for the literature not to differentiate between elected officers (EOs) and permanent members of staff or appointed officers (AOs) and to present them as a homogeneous group or as interchangeable. There is one exception, which suggests that permanent staff in SUs have gained importance at the expense of EOs (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). This poses a number of questions about how and why the roles of SU officers are changing and what the implications are for the dynamic between EOs and AOs and union decision-making, and how SUs operate.

Also, how are changes in union membership and the institutional context within which SUs are embedded influencing these changes. A further issue is the selection of a conceptual model suitable for framing the analysis of change in contemporary SUs.

The conceptual framework relating to business interest associations in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999) was identified as a way of thinking about and understanding the influence that members and HEIs have on the way SUs operate as intermediary organisations. The framework suggests that the organisational features of intermediary organisations are shaped by the logic of membership and the logic of influence or the need to influence an authority with power over its members' interests. In the case of SUs the characteristics of both their membership and their host HEI are the influencing factors. The literature review identified a number of common characteristics of SU membership - student consumer-orientation, and the size and diversity of membership, and HEIs - executive decision-making, a managerialist culture and professionalisation. These features of the conceptual model were used to frame the analysis.

This study aims to further understanding of change in contemporary SUs from the perspective of the officers who work in unions. The core research question is - **How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?**

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

The study used a sampling method and a multiple case approach. Six case SUs were selected representing SUs in pre 92 universities (four) two of which were also research intensive, and post 92 universities (two). The sample range covered small, medium and large SUs, determined by the size of their student membership. The study used semi-structured interviews to gather data based on SU officers'

perceptions of the way their SU was changing and why. Three EOs, including the SU President (in five SUs) and the CEO (representing permanent staff) were interviewed in each of the selected SUs. All of the interviews took place in the SUs' offices. Following an initial analysis of the data three semi-structured interviews of External Trustees were undertaken in three of the SUs in the sample. The data was collected through May and June 2016. The study covers the period in HE up to the end of July 2016, effectively the end of the 2015/16 academic year. A critical realist conceptual framework was used in recognition that SU officers have to make sense of their roles within the context of their interactions and relationships with other actors and within the context of institutional structures, norms, rules, and cultures, which constrain and facilitate decision-choices (Klemenčič, 2014).

As a general finding and observation this study revealed the complexity of SUs and the challenges facing EOs and CEOs in balancing the sometimes competing and conflicting demands of their members, the expectations of their host HEI, and external regulatory requirements (interpreted broadly to include legal, financial, and quality assurance requirements). Most SUs are medium or large-scale charitable organisations, some with multi-million-pound turnovers, delivering a range of services to large and diverse memberships. This study suggests that to carry out these functions effectively SUs have had to develop management systems administered by permanent members of staff. This study revealed that all of the SUs in the sample had increased the capacity of their union in recent years to deal with an increase in the complexity and volume of their work by appointing additional members of permanent staff.

The analysis of data suggests that all the SUs in the sample had reoriented their functions to prioritise representation. This finding supports the findings of other empirical studies (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). The analysis revealed that this shift was largely a response to the increasing consumer-orientation of students. The results suggest that a significant decline in income from SU commercial activities, caused primarily by students preferring off-campus venues for entertainment and social activities, had contributed to this shift. This decline in income impacted on SUs in two ways. Firstly, without this income stream unions were more dependent on their host HEI for the resources they needed to operate. This potentially reduced the freedom unions had to determine their own agenda and the possibility of greater interference or steering from their host HEI, which may weaken union claims that they are independent organisations. Secondly, it is suggested that as students go elsewhere for their entertainment and to socialise their loyalty to their SU weakens and unions have to find other ways of building student loyalty. The findings from this study reveal that all the SUs in the study believed that they needed to build student loyalty and secure and maintain student support by increasing student engagement

with their union and by emphasising their representative function as a means of mitigating their dependency on their HEI.

This study suggests that the decision by SUs to focus on their representative function had significantly increased their work relating to intermediation between students and their host HEI. The results suggested that to do this effectively the sample SUs had increased communications and contacts with students to determine, amongst other things, their preferences and needs, and to translate and aggregate these into actions. The study revealed that all of the SUs in the sample had tailored their approach to the way they interacted with their host HEI to take account of the shift in HEIs away from traditional collegiate forms of governance to executive management structures and decision-making. It is suggested that expanding intermediary activities is likely to increase the influence of their student membership and the influence of their host HEI on the way SUs operate.

An important finding of this study was the impact of charity registration on all of the SUs in the sample. The study revealed that all the SUs in the sample had registered as charities in their own right following the changes to charity legislation in 2006 (Charities Act) and this had led to significant changes in governance and management arrangements. Charitable status confers a number of benefits including exemption from paying certain taxes, however, retaining charitable status is conditional upon organisations operating within their charitable objects, which includes how they manage and use their funds. All the SUs in the sample had established Trustee Boards, which included External Trustees typically drawn from the professions or business, to oversee compliance with their charitable objects. The findings suggest that the Trustee Board, and in particular the External Trustees, exerted considerable influence over the management and decision-making in SUs. The results of this study suggest that the requirements associated with charity registration acted as a constraint on decision-making choices and the way officers considered proposed actions. The findings suggest that the requirements of charity registration had had a significant impact on the roles and responsibilities of most SU officers, and in particular the CEO.

This study reveals that the above changes impacted on the roles and responsibilities of nearly all the EOs in the SUs in the sample. The findings reveal that of the four roles for EOs identified by the NUS (NUS, 2009) the activist role had all but disappeared (except for SU5 & SU6) and that the focus was on the representative, minister, and trustee roles, but not equally for all EOs. The findings suggest a shift towards a specialisation of roles, with some EOs focusing on their minister role, for example, sports, while others focused on their representative and trustee role. Charity registration had also impacted on those EOs who served as trustees on the

Trustee Board. The study reveals that this responsibility tended to dampen EOs' enthusiasm for decision-choices that might in any way threaten or risk charitable status. Those EOs whose role was focused on representation were also affected by the increase in intermediation with their host HEI, as they were often tasked with meeting and building relations with senior institutional managers.

An important finding was that the power and influence of the CEO had been strengthened by changes in governance and management arrangements, most of which had been introduced as a response to the requirements of charity registration. The introduction of strategic plans and the adoption of formal approaches to planning and resource management had also strengthened the position of the CEO. The increased power and influence of the CEO was particularly noticeable when set against the inexperience of EOs, compounded by their short period in office. This goes some way to supporting the suggestion that permanent staff in SUs are becoming more important (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a). A key finding was how inexperienced and un-prepared EOs were for the complexity and the workloads involved in their role and their responsibilities. Nearly all were heavily reliant on the CEO and other permanent staff, particularly in the early phase of their term of office. All of the SUs in the sample delivered an induction and training programme for EOs and it was noted that the CEO and other permanent staff had significant influence over the structure, content and delivery of the programme. The data revealed that the induction programme tended to reinforce the representative role of SUs. There was a significant gap in experience and expertise between EOs and their CEO, which some EOs suggested narrowed as they gained experience 'on the job'. The findings also suggest that EOs were aware of their inexperience and had attempted to mitigate it through networking and support from the NUS. The analysis of findings reveals that there was resistance in SU5 and SU6 to the power and influence of the CEO, the focus on the student experience and 'local' issues. EOs in these unions continued to campaign as activists and this often led to tensions between EOs and the CEO.

The results suggest that most decisions taken by senior leadership teams in the SUs in the study were made on a consensus basis without the need for voting, and that officers accepted the rules of collective responsibility. The findings suggest that the procedures determining how meetings were organised and chaired were largely determined by the CEO. This meant that meetings were conducted in a business-like manner with formal practices for agreeing agendas and requirements for putting forward proposals. The interview data suggest that there was a good working relationship between EOs and the CEO in most of the SUs, and that tensions or disagreements were usually over union priorities and actions, which revealed how timescales impacted upon the decision preferences of EOs and CEOs respectively. EOs were focused on achieving their manifesto promises, and more,

during their relatively short term in office in order to leave what they regarded as their "legacy" and also to enhance their CV. In contrast CEOs were, probably because of their responsibility for strategic planning and the financial sustainability of their union, focused more on the medium to longer-term, which were very much linked to maintaining good relations with their host HEI and positive external perceptions about the management and operation of the SU. The findings suggest that this approach to decision-making served a number of purposes, including more effective decisions, and perhaps as important, as a demonstration to external stakeholders that the SU was being managed effectively by competent professionals. The analysis suggests that this deliberate attempt to build confidence and trust in the SU was thought by CEOs to provide the basis for effective relations with senior institutional managers. A key finding was the importance of access to senior managers and their willingness to engage with SU officers.

This study reveals that all the SUs in the sample had adopted a strategic and tactical approach to the way they managed their interactions with their host HEIs. All of the SUs in the sample were represented on formal committees in their HEIs. The findings suggest that these committees had become less important in terms of SU influence over institutional decision-making, but attendance was regarded as a signifier of union support for the HEI, but more by CEOs. This study suggests that the primary focus for the SUs in the sample was on building effective relationships with senior institutional managers, in recognition of the power and influence of senior managers in institutional decision-making structures. This is perhaps best illustrated by the induction, training and briefing of EOs to ensure that they understood the political nature of the relationships with senior managers, who the movers and shakers were in their HEI, and how to manage relations with them.

The findings reveal that all the SUs in the sample had intensified their efforts to increase face-to-face contact and communication between EOs and students. The re-location of SU offices to give students more access to EOs and the proactive management of the SU website provide examples of this shift. This approach had a number of objectives, notably to increase student engagement and input into the business and operation of the SU. The findings suggest that this was motivated by officers' belief, particularly CEOs, that increasing and improving student engagement would build student loyalty and support and provide evidence to demonstrate the value of the SU to external stakeholders. The implications were that SUs were increasingly operating a more direct model of representative democracy based on the assumption that students know best what is in their interests (Williams, 2004) and that the SU should act as a conduit for resolving their issues and meeting their needs based on their experience, rather than the SU making judgements about what was in students' best interests. This reveals an important switch from a representative democratic model that has EOs taking the

lead to a more direct model that involves EOs operating more as facilitators for student preferences and needs.

Finally, this study reveals that all the SUs in the sample had introduced similar changes to their governance and management structures and had similar operating features. A number of suggestions were made to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, in a market-led HE system all SUs are under similar pressures from consumer-oriented students and corporate HEIs. Secondly, governance and management arrangements are the responsibility of the CEO. The study reveals that CEOs are actively involved in, and rely on, networks with other CEOs and that these networks facilitate the sharing of what is regarded as good management practice. This suggests isomorphic tendencies (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). This study argues that whilst differences were identified these differences did not sufficiently differentiate the approaches adopted by the SUs in the sample.

7.2 Contribution to the Literature

A primary motivation for this study was to add to the relatively small body of literature on SUs. The literature on SUs is wide ranging and includes: theoretical works on how student agency is exercised through SUs and national student associations (Klemenčič, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014) studies of student protest movements that involve SUs (Hensby, 2013) studies on understanding student representation (Rodgers et al., 2006, 2011, Luescher-Mamashela, 2013) and a small number of empirical studies that focus on how SUs have responded to consumerisation and neo-liberalism (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015b, Lu Guan, Cole and Worthington, 2015). With one exception (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015a) there is very little research on the impact of changes in SU membership and institutional context on the roles and responsibilities of EOs and the CEO (as representing permanent staff), the dynamic between EOs and between EOs and the CEO, and how this impacts on SU decision-making and the organisational features of SUs. This study addresses this gap in current knowledge and proposes a conceptual framework that has utility in answering the research questions posed and wider application for analysis of change in SUs.

This study suggests that SUs play a central role in representing student interests. The results of this study support other studies that suggest that in recent years the emphasis on this representative function has increased. This study has furthered understanding of how changes to membership and the institutional context within which SUs are embedded have impacted on the nature of SU representation, the way SUs engage with their members and their HEI, the roles and responsibilities of officers, management and decision-making, and how SUs operate. This study

suggests from the sample a number of general trends in SUs including a greater focus on the preferences of student members as consumers resulting in a more targeted and systematic approach to engagement with student members and their host HEI, and a more managed approach to planning and operational matters. These changes have largely diminished SUs taking the lead in political activism – reflecting a shift away from concerns about national policy developments, which suggests that SUs are adapting to environmental change.

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on SUs by building on extant empirical studies and by testing and challenging theoretical propositions. This thesis contributes to the literature in a number of ways. Firstly, it reveals why and how contemporary SUs are changing and what this means for the way they operate and their effectiveness. Secondly, a conceptual framework is used as a means of thinking about the forces for change faced by SUs and for organising data. Thirdly, the study reveals the different identities and motivations of EOs and the CEO (representing permanent staff). Fourthly, it provides valuable insights into the complexity and operation of contemporary SUs.

7.3 Limitations

Some of the limitations of the research design for this study are set out in the methodology chapter. Perhaps the most obvious limitation is the ability to generalise from a single or small number of SUs and interviews and how representative the sample is. There are over a 160 SUs in HEIs in the UK and the six SUs selected for this study represent a small percentage of that total number. Also, it can be argued that the HE sector consists of a diverse range of HEIs with different characteristics, histories, and cultures, all of which are likely to influence the organisation and operation of their SU. This can be illustrated by the way HEIs are grouped, typically as research intensive, post and pre 92 universities, and selecting and recruiting institutions. This study used a multiple case approach to answer some of these issues. The SUs in this study were selected to provide a good representative sample by including SUs in pre and post 92 universities (some of which were research intensive) and SUs in small, medium, and large HEIs. It is argued that this process of selection provided a representative sample of SUs in institutional contexts with different characteristics and this allowed for some generalisation of results.

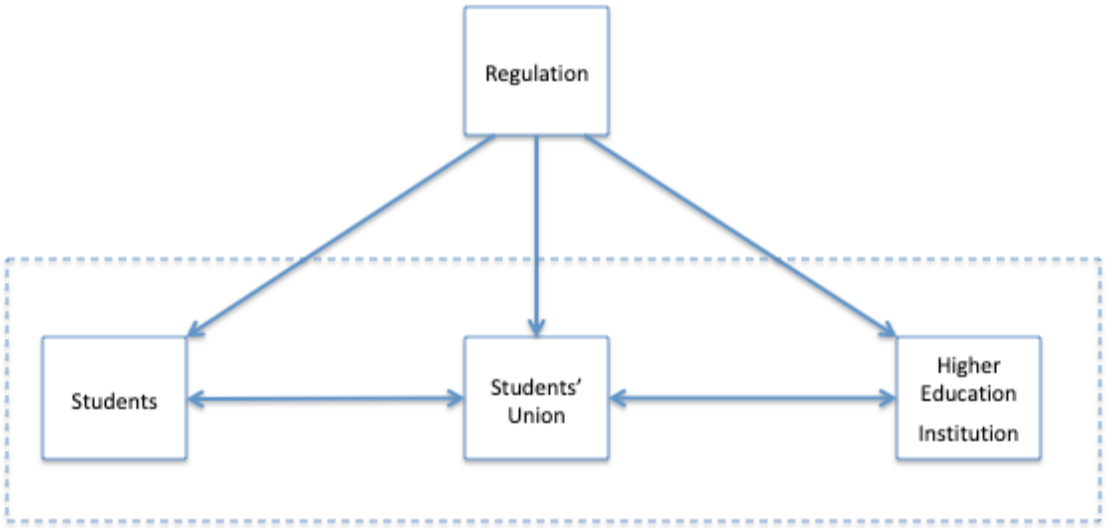
The author maintained a high level of reflexivity throughout the data collection process. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. 27 semi-structured interviews were undertaken over a two-month period. This thesis argues

that despite the limitations listed here the results of this study are reliable and robust.

7.4 A Conceptual Model for Studying Students' Unions

This thesis argues that features of the conceptual model in Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999) based on the influence of the logic of membership and the logic of influence on organisational features has utility for the study of SUs as intermediary organisations. The conceptual framework also includes two further logics, the logic of goal formation and the logic of efficient implementation. The analysis of data suggests that these logics had less application in analysing SUs, and these are excluded from the adapted conceptual model (Figure 2). The adapted model includes a further dimension to allow for other external factors grouped as 'regulation', which takes into account the highly regulated nature of the HE sector and the impact on the actors involved, that is, students, SUs, and HEIs. Regulation also incorporates regulations from outside the HE sector that impact on the actors, for example, charity legislation and consumer legislation. The dotted rectangle indicates what is conceptualised as a semi-closed system that emphasises the nature of the close relationships and interdependencies between the actors involved. The conceptual framework can also be viewed as a spectrum along which SUs can position themselves; too close to their host HEI and they risk losing the support of their members, too close to their members and they risk losing the trust and confidence of their host HEI. Effective SUs are likely to achieve a balance between the often competing logics of membership and influence.

Figure 2 *A Conceptual Framework for Studying Students' Unions*



Adopted and adapted from Schmitter and Streeck (1981/1999).

7.5 Future Directions for Research

The marketisation of HE is an international phenomenon that has opened up HE to competition and student choice. The literature on SUs, including this study, has relied on the perceptions of those who work for or are associated with SUs including senior HEI managers to inform research in this area. Future research could usefully focus on the role and purpose of SUs from the perspective of student members. A number of studies suggest that how students perceive their HE experience has been influenced by their reconceptualization as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017). This suggests that students focus more on their HE experience and seek value for money from their HEI. It is argued that this tendency increased following the increase in tuition fees in 2012. It would be of interest to investigate how far these perceptions apply to students' perceptions of their SU and what the implications are for SUs of these changing expectations.

Another area of interest is the impact of social media on SUs. This study reveals the increased use of social media by SU officers to communicate with students. Its use was primarily as a way of keeping students informed about union activities and what particular officers were working on. This study also revealed that social media being used to hold EOs to account for their actions and for the actions of the union. There were examples of EOs being 'trolled' online, which in some cases had impacted negatively on their approach to their role. The impact and

implications of the increasing use of social media in democratic systems offers rich potential for research on SUs.

Higher education is evolving nationally and internationally and traditional models of HE based on full-time undergraduate study are competing with different models of delivery, facilitated by the development of new technologies, much of which is offered by private HE providers. This type of provision looks set to expand and to replace some existing traditional provision. One of the issues facing contemporary SUs is how they can offer their services to students who are not based for all or even part of their time on campus. What future for SUs in this changing context is a question that offers huge potential for future research.

7.6 Reflections on the Future of Students' Unions and Closing Thoughts

SUs exist and operate in a fast changing and dynamic HE sector and it seems clear that to survive they are going to have to adapt to this changing context. SUs face a number of threats: from the government, their host HEI, their student members, and sector agencies. Each is dealt with separately below.

SUs are formally recognised in statute as the representative body for students. Whilst this gives SUs some protection in terms of their independence and legitimacy it puts them at risk from political change. Perhaps the biggest threat is the way they receive their funding. Currently all students registered on a course in a HEI automatically become members of their SU, unless they choose to opt out of union membership, which is very rarely exercised. The opt out provision has been challenged historically and continues to be questioned, often in terms of offering students a choice - drawing on arguments relating to market competition, and the monopoly enjoyed by SUs. There are international examples (Sweden and Australia) of experiments with voluntary student unionism with students effectively having to choose to 'opt in' to union membership. A change of this nature would have a significant negative impact on SU funding, particularly at a time when unions are experiencing a major decline in income from their commercial activities - which shows little sign of recovery. It can be argued that the risk of politically motivated change is increased by SUs being involved in contentious and controversial issues. A current example, which has attracted criticism from government and a commitment to address what is perceived as a problem, is the debate around free speech in HEIs and in particular the position some SUs have adopted on 'no-platforming', which critics argue is restricting free speech. Another aspect of funding is that there is no nationally agreed formula for funding SUs, funding tends to be agreed annually with their host HEI and is typically based on

historical factors and student numbers. History suggests that tighter budgets in HEIs are likely to have a knock-on effect on SUs leaving them vulnerable.

Some SUs are under pressure from their host HEI to focus their resources on representation and to close their commercial activities, which often compete on campus with those operated by their HEI. This would further reduce SU income from this source and increase their dependency on their HEI with the associated potential threat to their independence and the increased likelihood of interference or intervention in their affairs. Interventions of this nature by HEIs are likely to be achieved through conditions attached to funding or the provision of other resources, for example, accommodation.

In a marketised system SUs may also face a threat from their own members. As many SUs seem to have realised (and as this study reveals) the loyalty and support of their members is vital to their survival. A strong base of support is likely to mitigate, at least in part, threats from government and their HEI. Critics and even those close to students cite the poor turnout at SU elections as an indicator of low levels of student interest in and the value they place on their union. A related issue for SUs is the challenge to the traditional model of HE based on full-time undergraduate study and students studying away from home. There is already evidence of increasing numbers of students living at home and attending their local HEI whilst working part-time to fund their HE. Also, increasing numbers of students are studying online courses offered by private providers. This diversity of provision is favoured by government because it is argued that it increases student choice and competition. It seems likely that the full-time undergraduate market will contract and with it SU membership. Perhaps as a final point the recent establishment of the Office for Students and the already functioning Office of the Independent Adjudicator exist to protect and promote student interests. These agencies provide students with other routes to resolve their grievances and may in future provide an alternative to SUs.

On a more optimistic note, SUs have proved to be resilient and adaptive to change. If, as contemporary SUs seem to be doing, unions can continue to convince their members, potential members, and other key stakeholders, that is, government and HEIs, that they add value to the student experience they are likely to have a fighting chance. Perhaps the final question should be for students and HEIs, if SUs were closed down what would replace them?

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol and Consent Form

Introduction – The Researcher

My name is Tony Schorah. I am studying for a Doctor of Business Administration in Higher Education Management at the University of Bath http://www.bath.ac.uk/management/dba/. The doctorate is by submission of a thesis. The brief outline below explains the main elements of the research project and the completion of the work contributing towards the thesis.

My interest in this area of study derives from my experience in higher education. I retired from full-time employment as the Registrar & Secretary of Falmouth University in 2014 after over 35 years in higher education working as a researcher, tutor, administrator, and manager. During my 25 years at Falmouth University I was the senior manager responsible for liaising with the Students' Union.

The Research Project

Students' Unions continue to play an important and central role in universities. The purpose of my research is to gain insight and understanding of how contemporary Students' Unions have adapted the way they organise and operate in order to deal with the massive changes in higher education policy that have impacted on their student members and their universities. This includes changes to the way Students' Unions perceive their role, and the way they represent their members through engagement with their university, and what this means for the way union officers do their jobs and make decisions.

The following areas of enquiry seek to inform this broad research topic:

- The way Students' Unions engage with their student members.
- The way Students' Unions engage with their university.
- How officers perceive and operationalize their roles.
- How elected officers and permanent staff work together.

- How Students' Unions decide on their priorities.

At a practical level this study should help Students' Unions to better understand their journey and the potential implications for their future strategic direction and development. At an academic level the study's findings will add to the small but growing body of research on Students' Unions.

My Research Supervisors are;

Professor Rajani Naidoo – http://www.bath.ac.uk/managment /faculty/rajani_naidoo.html

Professor Ian Jamieson – Visiting Professor, School of Management, University of Bath.

The Research Process

Your participation in this study will involve an interview with me lasting approximately one hour, in a location and at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be semi-structured, that is, I will ask you a number of broad questions relating to the areas of enquiry listed above. You do not have to prepare for the interview. Recording your responses is important, for accuracy and authenticity, and as such, and unless you request otherwise, the interview will be digitally recorded. I will transcribe the recording and you will receive a copy of the written record to check it for accuracy prior to any analysis of your responses.

The interview is private and the record of our conversation will remain confidential to you and me, and will be stored anonymously under code in electronic form, for example, Respondent 1, Students' Union B. All records will be held under encryption. Any direct quotes used in the thesis will not be attributed, your name and Students' Union will not appear.

The interview records from interviews with you and other participants will provide the data for this qualitative research project. The findings from the study will be analysed by me and will form the basis of the conclusions in the final thesis. The thesis will be read by my supervisors (see above) and examiners appointed by the University of Bath. The research may also be submitted for publication. The thesis will be publicly available through the Library at the University of Bath.

Risk

This study poses little or no risk to its participants. I will make every effort to ensure that confidentiality is maintained both in terms of the storage of interview records and by not citing the names of participants in the thesis.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and may request that the data collected through the interview process is not used in the study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Thank you

A. S. Schorah

April 2016

Formal Consent

By signing below you confirm that you have read and understood the information above and agree to participate in this research project.

Name of interviewee: …….

Signature: …… Date: ……

Appendix B

Researcher – Interview Guide and Prompts/Questions

Elected Officer (EO)

Core Research Question

How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

Introduction

- Thank you for signing the consent form and agreeing to take part in this research project.

- This interview will be transcribed by me and will remain confidential. All the data will be held securely and any quotes used in the thesis will not be attributed.

- Are you happy for the interview to be recorded?

- The format of the interview will be semi-structured and informal. I will lead with some questions but feel free to raise anything you feel is relevant as we go along.

Easing into the interview

How did you get involved in the Students' Union and how did you come to stand as an elected officer?

Role and Responsibilities

Tell me briefly about your current role?

How closely does the reality of the job match what you expected or understood it to be?

Do you think you need any particular skills or qualities to do the job? What do you think they are?

Did you receive an induction and/or training for the role? Tell me what was involved?

Where do you go to for advice and information to help you do your job – internally and externally?

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

Do you think this will help your career?

What do you think the main purpose of the Students' Union is?

Working Relationships

What does the CEO do – what's their role?

Talk me through your typical day or week?

Tell me how you work with other members of the SU team.

How often do you meet as a group of elected officers and how often with the CEO?

Decision-making

Tell me about your involvement in deciding SU campaigns and related actions – and the link between manifesto promises and the strategic plan.

Tell me what happens at meetings, how they work?

What's your experience of the NUS? What's NUS's influence on local activities?

Relationship with the University

Tell me about the union's relationship with the university.

What do you think the university expects from you and the Students' Union?

How would you describe the current relationship with the universities?

Talk me through how the Students' Union connects/communicates with the university?

In your opinion who's the SUs most important contact in the university – and why?

What works best in terms of the union getting what it wants from the university?

Conclusion

What are your thoughts about the future of Students' Unions?

Is there anything else that you feel is important and you'd like to say?

What next.

You'll receive a draft of the transcript of the interview via email for you to check for factual accuracy within the next three weeks. If there is anything you would like to discuss please contact me.

I may also follow up on certain points – if that's ok?

Thank you again for taking part.

A S Schorah

DBA University of Bath

April 2016

Appendix C

Researcher – Interview Guide and Prompts/Questions

Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Core Research Question

How are changes in their membership and institutional context impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

The following supplementary research questions were derived from this core question:

- What impact are changes in membership and institutional context having on the way students' union officers perceive and operationalise their roles and interpret the purpose of the students' union?
- How are officers' perceptions impacting on the dynamic between elected and appointed officers and students' union decision-making?
- How are the perceptions of officers impacting on the organisation and effectiveness of students' unions?

Introduction

- Thank you for signing the consent form and agreeing to take part in this research project.

- This interview will be transcribed by me and will remain confidential. All the data will be held securely and any quotes used in the thesis will not be attributed.

- Are you happy for the interview to be recorded?

- The format of the interview will be semi-structured and informal. I will lead with some questions but feel free to raise anything you feel is relevant as we go along.

Easing into the interview

Tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in Students' Unions.

Role and Responsibilities

Tell me about your current role as Chief Executive Officer.

How closely does the reality of the job match what you expected or understood?

Do you need any particular skills or qualifications?

Where do you go to for advice and information to help you do your job?

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

What do the Elected Officers do – what's their role? Do they get an induction/training?

What do you think the main purpose of the SU is?

Talk me through your typical day or week.

Working Relationships

Tell me how you work with other members of the team.

Decision-making

What's your involvement in decisions about union campaigns and related actions? And, Planning and finance?

What's your experience of the NUS and their influence on local activities?

Relationship with the University

What does the university expect from you and how do you know?

How would you describe the current relationship with the university?

Talk me through the way the Students' Union connects/communicates with the university.

Who's the most important contact in the university – and why?

What works best in terms of the union get what it wants from the university?

Conclusion

What are your thoughts about the future of Students' Unions?

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you feel you'd like to say in relation to the questions I've asked or more generally about Students' Unions?

What next.

You'll receive a draft of the transcript of the interview via email for you to check for factual accuracy within the next three weeks. If there is anything you would like to discuss please contact me.

I may also follow up on certain points – if that's ok?

Thank you again for taking part.

A S Schorah

DBA University of Bath

April 2016